

**POSITIVE-THINKING AND POST-WAR PROSPERITY:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE LIFE AND
WRITING OF NORMAN VINCENT PEALE**

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Abstract

The following thesis examines the life and writing of Norman Vincent Peale in order to understand his popular appeal in 1950s America.

Norman Vincent Peale was an important leader in the revival that swept American Protestantism in the 1950s. Given the popularity of his best-known book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, his magazine *Guideposts*, and his consistent presence on radio and in magazines and newspapers, he was arguably the best-known religious figure of the decade. Interestingly, his popularity faded dramatically after the decade and his speaking engagements became more centered on the business community.

The following thesis examines who Peale was and what enabled him to be such a successful religious leader during the 1950s. It examines his life and traces how his early experiences played out in his forty plus books. It examines his contemporary critics and offers the author's critique from an evangelical point of view. It then examines the origins of his thought, tracing his thinking to mind cure, American exceptionalism, and Methodism. Finally, it argues that Peale's success capitalized on the cultural climate of post-war America to enable his success in that decade.

Vita

Daniel Walsh grew up in North Dakota and completed a B.A. in International Affairs at the University of Maine, *summa cum laude*. His areas of concentration were modern East Asian and European History and French. He entered the Master of Divinity program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in 2006 before moving to Washington, DC and Brazil for four years. In 2010 he began the M.A. program in Church History. He will finish both degrees in May 2013.

Daniel currently serves as Youth Minister at First Parish Congregational Church in Wakefield, Massachusetts. He is also the Semlink Teaching Fellow for Church History at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Acknowledgements

This seeds of this project were planted a number of years ago and began to grow through an interest in understanding the rise and decline of mainline Protestantism in mid-century America. I was introduced to Norman Vincent Peale by my father at a young age and read several of his books during high school and college. I came to understand some aspects of the positive thinking subculture in American business through his work and through a number of other authors.

While considering the mid-twentieth century American revival, I once again encountered the influence of positive thinking as portrayed by Peale. During a Church history course at Gordon-Conwell I learned of the rapid growth and decline during the 1950s and 1960s and simply could not stop reading in an attempt to figure out why those events occurred. After two years of reading I decided to work on that time period and Peale became an obvious lens through which to examine it.

This project would never have started without my father's influence on me as a child, so it is to him I must give the first acknowledgment. Although his intentions in introducing me to positive thinking literature were quite different than an academic study of them, the fruits of those books, meetings, and conversations are the following thesis. I am grateful to him for all the books and discussions over the years.

I am also grateful to Dr. Garth M. Rosell for allowing me to do this project and for guiding me through it for the better part of a year. Without his research and editing guidance this project would have run off in many different directions.

The early months of this project were spent reading numerous primary and secondary sources and the time necessary to complete that research would not have been possible without my in-laws, Wade and Vicki, who were gracious enough to care for my family and home.

The greatest gratitude for this project is reserved for my wife, Melissa. This project was part of an additional degree program that I would never have started without her encouragement and insistence. Adding the degree meant at least another year of school and even more student loans. It also meant a significant career change for her. Without her willingness and sacrifice this project would never have started. Thank you.

Abrham Kuyper, the Dutch church leader, once said something to this effect: "There is not one square inch of creation over which God does not declare, Mine!" I do not know how a thesis about Norman Vincent Peale fits into God's design for his world, but I am grateful, above all, to Him for granting me the passion and commitment necessary for the project. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

Introduction

Scraps of paper were strewn across the bed. More than a year of work had gone into producing a manuscript for a book called *The Power of Faith*. Despite his earlier success with *A Guide to Confident Living* one publisher thought his new manuscript would not sell and recommended it be repackaged as a daily manual. Eager to please and get his message out the public, Norman Vincent Peale had cut up the typed manuscript and was trying to rearrange its parts on the bed. The task seemed hopeless so into a drawer went the scraps.

One year later the deconstructed manuscript was out of the drawer and in the hands of the man who would become known for his belief in the power of positive thinking. Yet there he sat, despondent, defeated, thinking that his manuscript was unfit to print. Perhaps he had not been following God's leading in his life and it was time to turn his efforts toward other pursuits. If publishers did not want the manuscript, then what was the point? Hundreds of pages went into the waste bin with thoughts of good riddance.

Fortunately for Peale, his wife Ruth was not as defeated by the publisher as was Norman. After he left the room, Ruth salvaged the manuscript from the bin, packaged it, and sent it to Myron Boardman at Prentice-Hall for further review.¹ This time the publisher was excited about the manuscript and ready to publish it, but one hurdle remained, a title. Boardman believed the word "faith" in the title would exclude a large swath of readers uninterested in religious ideas. Instead, he

¹ This story is drawn from Norman Vincent Peale, *The True Joy of Positive Living: An Autobiography* (Pawling, NY: Foundation for Christian Living, 1984), 140.

suggested a title that recurred over and over again within the manuscript itself. “He thought the phrase was so attractive, so deep in meaning that it might very well become a title that would live on for years and make its way into the thinking, even the language of our country.”² The title would be *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

The Power of Positive Thinking was published in October of 1952. November 9 it debuted twelfth on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and May 17, 1953 it reached number one, outselling the popular Revised Standard Version of the Bible.³ It became one of the most popular books of the decade, selling millions of copies, and made Norman Vincent Peale a household name. Despite the origins of the book’s publishing, Peale became associated with positive thinking and was arguably, the best-known religious figure of the time.⁴

Peale rose from a poor, rural upbringing in Ohio to become a millionaire and friend to international dignitaries, CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, and confidant to several U.S. Presidents. His message of positive thinking impacted unknown millions of people around the world and it grew out of his personal struggle with a self-described inferiority complex. He published more than 40 books and hundreds of

² Ibid., 141.

³ Accessed 29 March 2012 at <http://www.hawes.com/pastlist.htm>

⁴ The other notable religious leaders of the time were the Roman Catholic Bishop, Fulton Sheen and the evangelical evangelist, Billy Graham. Of the three, Graham enjoyed long-lasting notoriety, but during the decade it would have been difficult to determine who of the three was the best known. “Indeed, no other contemporary religious figure, save perhaps, and then only perhaps, for evangelist Billy Graham, has come close to matching Peale’s influence.” Roy M. Anker, *Self-Help and Popular Religion in Modern American Culture: An Interpretive Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 101.

newspaper and magazine columns, was the voice of a radio program for more than 50 years, and founded the Foundation for Christian Living.⁵

While immensely popular in the 1950s, Peale's popularity and public persona waned concurrent with Mainline Protestantism in the decades that followed. His core message, that positive thinking can overcome most of life's obstacles, sold well in the decade of optimism and prosperity, but seemed incongruent with the turbulent realities of 1960s America. His initial success was aided by his historical moment and his message represents a unique blend of various streams of American thought.

To those who knew him, Peale was a driven, genuine man seeking to share the message of Christianity in a practical, scientific, and methodical manner. He believed in Jesus Christ as the only savior and wanted others to know that same truth. He seized on the religious fervor of the decade to promote an ideology he honestly believed would lead people to Christ and would assist them in living fulfilled, complete lives.

⁵ The Foundation for Christian Living is now known as the Peale Center for Christian Living and maintains its headquarters in Pawling, NY.

Chapter One

Biographical Sketch of Norman Vincent Peale

Norman Vincent Peale was born in rural Ohio to a Methodist pastor father and a devoted Christian mother. He attended Ohio Wesleyan University and worked briefly as a journalist in Detroit, before earning a Master's of Social Ethics and a Bachelor's of Sacred Theology degree at Boston University. He served three churches before being called to Marble Collegiate Church in New York City in 1932. With that as a pastoral home base, Peale founded *Guideposts* magazine, spoke at conferences around the world, and published 41 books before retiring in 1984. He passed away in 1993 at the age of 95, and is remembered primarily for his multitudinous publications and *Guideposts*.

Norman was born the eldest of three brothers to Clifford and Anna Delaney Peale. Clifford was a medical doctor before accepting the call to the ministry. Anna was an organized woman and a committed Methodist who instilled in her children the disciplines of prayer and hard work.⁶ The Peale family stressed education and all three children obtained graduate degrees, with two of the boys becoming ministers and one becoming a doctor.⁷

⁶ Anna Delaney was "a bright and effervescent woman of Irish descent who later became a well-known speaker and advocate for world missions." Thomas E. Frank, "Norman Vincent Peale," in *Twentieth-Century Shapers of American Popular Religion*, ed. Charles H. Lippy, 326-334 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 327.

⁷ Robert Peale obtained his MD from Harvard University and Leonard followed in Norman's footsteps, obtaining a degree from Boston University. Robert was at Harvard while Norman was at BU and the two had weekly meals together. It was Norman's primary social outlet while at BU. See Carol V.R. George, *God's Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 48-49.

The family emphases on the compatibility between medicine and faith and practical piety had significant influence on the ministry of Peale.⁸ A respect for medicine, especially psychiatry, and its compatibility with faith led Peale to found the American Foundation of Religion and Psychiatry, now called the Blanton-Peale Institute and Counseling Center. His mother's practical piety had significant influence on the development of Norman's theology. Indeed his mother's focus on the practical power of prayer had significant impact on Peale personally. "Pray as you go about the business of the day, on the subway or bus or at your desk. Utilize minute prayers by closing your eyes to shut out the world and concentrating briefly on God's presence. The more you do this every day the nearer you will feel God's presence."⁹

Peale finished high school in Findlay, Ohio in 1916, and moved to Delaware, Ohio to study English Literature at Ohio Wesleyan University. He joined and lived in the Phi Gamma Delta Fraternity house and eventually became its president. Although his mother wanted Norman to become a minister he did not feel called and pursued his passion for journalism and dabbled in politics.¹⁰ He was eventually

⁸ Peale also inherited from his father an appreciation for the self-made man glorified by Horatio Alger stories. Clifford "admired the so-called self-made men of his time, who through the gospel of work demonstrated the effectiveness of the capitalist system: The successful entrepreneur was presumably a testimony not only to financial acumen but to moral virtue as well; he was a person who could be trusted" George, *God's Salesman*, 21. For background on Horatio Alger see Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), Jeffrey Louis Decker, *Made in America: Self-styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), and John Williams Tebbel, *From Rags to Riches: Horatio Alger, Jr. and the American Dream* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

⁹ Norman Vincent Peale, "The Power of Positive Thinking," in *Three Complete Books*, 7-222 (New York: Wings Books, 1994), 67.

¹⁰ Peale's entrée into politics was the 1918 presidential campaign for Republican hopeful Leonard Wood. Peale organized the campus campaign on his behalf. See, George, *God's Salesman*, 38-39 and Arthur Gordon, *Minister to Millions: A Biography of Norman Vincent Peale* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1958), 60-61.

associate editor of the school newspaper, *The Transcript*, and it helped land him a job in Detroit after graduation.

It was during a break from his journalism job in Detroit in which he was considering a job at a paper in Troy, Ohio that Peale made a fateful decision. Long plagued by vacillating thoughts of joining the ministry versus the desire to excel in politics Peale struggled with a perceived call to ministry upon attending a Methodist conference with his family in 1921. "Lord, he prayed, I'm willing to do whatever You want me to do. Help me to make the right decision! Send me a sign."¹¹ Without an evident sign he sent an urgent telegraph to Boston University requesting admission.¹² Providentially, at least in his mind, his application was accepted and he enrolled a few days later.

Peale was not content with simply the academic knowledge he gained at Boston University because he needed practical outlets for it. In some ways Peale was anti-intellectual and struggled to fit into the academic setting.¹³ He needed to see his classroom knowledge come alive in the lives of real people, and he received that opportunity on weekends during his second and third years at the university. Told by a church official that two New England churches were in need of a pastor, Peale chose to serve in the mill town of Berkeley, Rhode Island.¹⁴

¹¹ Gordon, *Minister to Millions*, 72.

¹² In their biographies of Peale, Gordon and George have differing stories on the circumstances of Peale's call to BU. As referenced here, Gordon contends that the telegram served as a sort of confirmation of the call, while George writes, "Still uncertain, he walked past some of his old haunts until late at night, when finally, as he remembered it, the conviction came, illuminated by the Presence of Jesus" (40). Peale clarified discrepancies in the details in a conversation with George in August of 1987. See note 45 in George, *God's Salesman*, 45 and the discussion of his call on page 40.

¹³ Peale was critical of his years at BU and only returned to the school once after graduation. See the discussion in George, *God's Salesman*, 46-53.

¹⁴ Peale, *The True Joy of Positive Living*, 68-79.

He stepped into a church mired in turmoil over local political problems between mill owners and workers. The conflict drove many English immigrants away from the church and Peale took it upon himself to build up the little congregation. During his tenure, the congregation grew from a few regular attendees at odds with one another over town politics to a sizeable congregation of cooperative parishioners.¹⁵

Having cut his teeth in a small town church and proven his leadership abilities, Peale was appointed Associate Minister of St. Mark's Methodist Church in New York after graduation, and served as the sole minister of a new church in the rapidly growing Flatlands neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York.¹⁶ It was in this role that Peale's ministry strategies developed significantly. "His message was already assuming the contours it would retain; it was a theologically liberal, inspirational talk that emphasized the transforming result of a relationship with Jesus and with the church. It was clearly a sermon about personal religion."¹⁷

Impressed with the advertising techniques of Madison Avenue across the East River, Peale developed provocative advertisements to attract people to Sunday services. Cards went out to homes in the neighborhood with catchy copy like "Why have our congregations increased until the church is crowded to capacity? Why has Sunday school attendance increased 100% in six months? Why are unchurched people of every Protestant denomination coming to us in increasingly large

¹⁵ Gordon, *Minister to Millions*, 90-100 gives a glowing account of Peale's experience in Berkeley. After issuing his first altar call and seeing five people come forward to accept Jesus Christ as savior, Gordon describes the experience as "staggering" and "incredible."

¹⁶ Between 1921 and 1924, the population of Flatbush increased by roughly 30,000 people. George, *God's Salesman*, 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

numbers? Come around and your questions will be answered.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Peale obtained the names of new residents from the power company and invited the families to attend the church.¹⁹

A diligent work ethic, provocative advertising strategies, admirable rhetorical skills, and a simple, practical message made him a success at King’s Highway Church. He served as its minister from 1924 until 1927 and watched it grow from 40 weekly attendees to more than 900 member families.²⁰ The success of the church drew interest from many suitor churches. Unbeknownst to him, University Methodist Church in Syracuse, New York was interested in inviting him to be its next minister when it invited him to preach in April 1927.

A call to serve as Minister of University Methodist Church came in May of 1927. Peale assumed the role and stayed until 1932. His time in Syracuse was significant for two reasons. First, it was there that he met and married Ruth Stafford. Second, in relationships with some of the area’s most influential citizens, Peale learned to navigate the realms of high society.

It is not an overstatement to say that Ruth Stafford Peale was the single most important influence on the life and career of Norman Vincent Peale. Ruth was the daughter of a Methodist minister and worked diligently during her young life to avoid marrying a minister. Despite her efforts, she was introduced to Norman at the

¹⁸ Gordon, *Minister to Millions*, 105.

¹⁹ George, *God’s Salesman*, 57.

²⁰ For Easter Sunday service in 1927 a hall was rented in which each of the 3,300 seats were filled and hundreds were turned away. Ibid., 101-111. There is discrepancy between George and Gordon on the number of initial members. George has the initial number at 100, but both agree that 900 was the final, whether that was families or individuals is unclear. See, George, 56.

University Church in 1928 and they married 2 years later on June 20, 1930. During their 61-year marriage they had three children, John, Margaret, and Elizabeth.²¹

As lifetime companions, Ruth served Norman through difficult times and critical decisions. Soon after assuming the pastorate at Marble Collegiate Church, Ruth and Norman took a trip to England. Norman was frustrated by and depressed about the condition of the church and the challenges that lay ahead. He went so far as to draft a resignation letter, but Ruth would have none of it. On a bench in some gardens near Keswick, Norman experienced “one of the determinative experiences” of his life.²²

“You,” she said, “are not only my husband. You are also my pastor, and in the latter department I’m frank to say I am becoming increasingly disappointed in you. I hear you from the pulpit talking about faith and trust in God’s wondrous power. But now I hear in you no faith or trust at all. You just whine your defeat. And to put it bluntly, what you need is a deep spiritual experience. You need to be converted.”²³

Ruth’s admonition had its intended effect. The Peales ended their vacation early and returned to New York.

Ruth was Norman’s partner in all his endeavors. Her strengths complemented him well and she was eager to do as much as possible for him so that he could focus on preaching and teaching.

He consistently referred to Ruth as his partner, explaining that theirs was a team ministry, as in fact it was. Similar models could be found in the

²¹ “The Peales had three children: Margaret Ann (Mrs. Paul F. Everett), the wife of a Presbyterian minister who was a leader of a church group called the “Pittsburgh Experiment” in Pennsylvania; John Stafford of Farmville, Va., a professor at Longwood College in Virginia, and Elizabeth Ruth (Mrs. John M. Allen) of Pawling, whose husband is a retired executive of *Reader’s Digest* and now is the president of the board of trustees of the Peale Center, and eight grandchildren.” George Vecsey, “Norman Vincent Peale, Preacher of Gospel Optimism, Dies at 95,” *New York Times*, December 26, 1993.

²² Peale, *The True Joy of Positive Living*, 125.

²³ Ibid.

marriages of other well-known evangelists. She was his devoted and only confidante, the person to whom he turned for information, comfort, and advice, an equal architect of his work.²⁴

In addition to meeting Ruth, Norman's time in Syracuse also gave him the opportunity to develop relationships with important members of society. Specific relationships built there served him personally for many years. But perhaps more important than any specific relationship was the growing comfort Norman developed in elite circles. This critical skill served him well.

The most critical relationship in Syracuse was with a man named Harlowe B. Andrews, owner of a wholesale grocery company. They developed a warm relationship through Andrews' support of his ministry, but a particular conversation was fundamental in the development of Peale's life. Wanting to eradicate a \$50,000 debt owed by the church, Peale went to Andrews seeking any amount he was willing to give. Andrews said he was not interested in giving, but said he would pray with Peale. Andrews prayed with him convincing Norman of the efficacy of positive prayer and then wrote a check for \$5,000.

While in Syracuse, Peale's methodology and ideology grew more like the form some have labeled Pealism.²⁵ He arrived in Syracuse as the Roaring Twenties were beginning to wane. The crash of '29 and the beginning of the Great Depression occurred during that ministry. In response to those crises, Peale "consciously restyled his preaching, speaking more freely extempore, offering more practical

²⁴ George, *God's Salesman*, 68.

²⁵ "Pealism" became a term used by his critics. One of the first published instances is found in Wayne E. Oates, "The Cult of Reassurance," *Religion in Life* 24, no. 1 (Winter 1954-1955): 72-82. It appears as "Pealeism" in George, *God's Salesman*.

advice, injecting fuller references to harmonial/mental science themes.”²⁶ This development was in spite of the fact that when he arrived in Syracuse he worried that his preaching would not be sufficiently erudite for his congregation of mostly university faculty and staff.²⁷

His success in Syracuse created much attention and interest from other churches.²⁸ In the summer of 1931 he received candidating invitations from First Methodist Church in Los Angeles, the largest Methodist church in the world at the time, and Marble Collegiate Church in Manhattan, part of the Reformed Church in America and one of the oldest congregations in the United States. After preaching at both churches he received invitations and struggled to make a difficult decision. Should he take the call to an established, prestigious, thriving congregation in Los Angeles or switch denominations and pastor an historic, but struggling church on Fifth Avenue?

The decision was difficult given the remarkable contrasts between the congregations, and Norman was indecisive. After standing offers from both sitting on his desk for weeks he and Ruth joined together in prayer seeking guidance as to which call he should accept. During lunch one day, Norman and Ruth prayed together for at least three or four hours seeking to make a decision “on the basis of what our Lord Jesus would have us do....Suddenly, in a definitive flash of insight as

²⁶ George, *God's Salesman*, 59.

²⁷ Peale gives credit for the development of this phase of his ideology to Hugh Tilroe, Dean of the Syracuse school of Speech and Drama, who offered him friendship and speaking advice. See, Peale, *True Joy*, 98-101 and George, 61.

²⁸ In his six years in Syracuse, membership at University Methodist grew from roughly 800 to roughly 1,600 people. George, *God's Salesman*, 66.

clear as a light, His answer came.”²⁹ The decision to move from Syracuse to Manhattan was made, and Peale would spend the next 52 years as minister there.³⁰

Perhaps the most important perk of the role at Marble Collegiate Church for Peale was the flexibility it gave him to pursue other interests. His role included three months vacation every summer and the basic expectation to preach on Sundays. Beyond that expectation he was free to pursue other interests. By the end of the 1940s his outside commitments and engagements were significant, drawing him away for much of each week. Indeed, the freedom he enjoyed at Marble enabled Peale to expand his interests substantially. It allowed him to launch the career that built his national fame.

National attention descended upon the Peale household in 1947 with the success of *A Guide to Confident Living*. Although Peale had been broadcasting a syndicated radio show since 1933 it took his book to catapult his career.³¹ The book was on the bestseller lists in 1948 and 1949 and increased the circulation of *Guideposts* magazine. The combination of publishing success and the growing

²⁹ Peale, *True Joy*, 120.

³⁰ It is not surprising that Peale choose the more difficult assignment. It was part of his story up to that point to choose more difficult paths. The choice of Berkeley was more difficult as was starting a new area of New York. “By experience and by nature I was, or at least I had been, a church troubleshooter” *True Joy*, 119. He liked the challenges and the glory of success that would come from success in difficult places.

³¹ “In the summer of 1933 Peale was asked to begin a radio program under the auspices of the Federal Council of Churches (later the National Council of Churches). Called “The Art of Living,” the program continued on Saturdays for the next forty years. It would later be joined by a ninety-second spot feature called “The American Character” and a regular broadcast of Peale’s Sunday sermon.” Thomas E. Frank, “Norman Vincent Peale,” in *Twentieth-Century Shapers of American Popular Religion*, ed. Charles H. Lippy, 326-334 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 329.

influence of religion in American society in the wake of successful revivals by Billy Graham pushed Peale further into the national spotlight.³²

Although his first foray into publishing brought acclaim and success, Peale became a household name when he published *The Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952. In the vibrant religious culture of the 1950s the book was a wild success. Success brought significant changes to the Peale household as Norman's already hectic schedule became almost unmanageable. Besides his responsibilities in New York, Peale published a weekly magazine column, oversaw each issue of *Guideposts*, and spoke at countless conventions and meetings in venues across the country.³³ He began appearing on television and was the cover story of many magazines including a 1955 issue of *Look*.

Along with Billy Graham and Bishop Fulton Sheen, Peale was among the most recognized faces and names in 1950s America.³⁴ His home in Pawling and his growing success put Peale in contact with government and business leaders, including Richard Nixon and Dwight Eisenhower. Peale learned not to engage too

³² The literature on the religious culture of the 1950s is vast. Some of the better works include Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), J. Ronald Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: Barricade Books, 1986), Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), Edward L. R. Elson, *America's Spiritual Recovery* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1954), and Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion, Volume 3: Under God, Indivisible, 1941-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³³ His weekly column in *Look* began June 29, 1954, but he wrote for the magazine at least as early as May 22, 1951. The piece was called "The Place of Prayer in America" and it explained the growth in prayer he observed across the country as a resurgence of the understanding that prayer works and helps people become better.

³⁴ For background on Sheen see, Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), Gregory Joseph Ladd, *Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen: A Man for All Media* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), Thomas C. Reeves, *America's Bishop: The Life and Times of Fulton J. Sheen* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2001). For background on Billy Graham see Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), David Aikman, *Billy Graham: His Life and Influence* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), Glen Daniels, *Billy Graham: The Man Who Walks with God* (New York: Paperback Library, 1961).

deeply in politics through a number of experiences, the most public of which occurred during the 1960 Presidential campaign between Nixon and John Kennedy. The public black eye that resulted damaged his image and serves as a symbolic break between his success in the fifties and the discouraging decade of the sixties.

In September 1960 Peale met with conservative religious leaders in Washington, DC to discuss a Protestant response to the possibility of a Roman Catholic serving as President of the United States. The group was a mixture of people involved in the National Council of Churches and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), who were concerned about Roman Catholicism's theology of church and state as it related to an American Catholic serving as President. After the meeting, Peale and Donald Gill, the leader of Citizens for Religious Freedom, a subsidiary of the NAE, served as spokesmen. "Peale discovered quickly how grievously he had misread the times."³⁵

The "Peale group" was lambasted in the media for being sectarian. They were accused of attempting to provide religious tests for elected officials. It was damaging to Peale's public image and prompted him to submit a resignation letter to Marble Collegiate Church, which was rejected.³⁶ The group was seen as closed-minded and its biggest critics were liberal Christians, especially Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennett, both faculty at Union Theological Seminary in New York and leading liberal thinkers.³⁷ The cultural tide was turning away from sectarian religious ideals and toward a more inclusive society that addressed societal ills like segregation. In

³⁵ George, 202. The author is indebted to George's discussion of the events of 1960 on pages 190-220 for the outline presented here. Especially relevant are pages 200-203.

³⁶ Ibid., 203.

³⁷ See the *New York Times*, September 11, 1960 and September 12, 1960 for some of the fallout.

publicly criticizing Kennedy from a Protestant point of view, Peale seemed out of touch with contemporary trends.

Peale eventually recovered from the Kennedy scandal, but his career was never the same. The immediate aftermath of *The Power of Positive Thinking* was the height of his popularity. As one author puts it, "The remainder of Peale's career proved remarkably tranquil."³⁸ During the 1960s Peale continued to publish books, including *The Tough-Minded Optimist*, which can be seen as Peale's critique of his liberal Protestant critics, contribute to magazines, and manage *Guideposts*. His influence became more centered in business circles as popular attention turned away from religion and toward the issues of the day. In 1968 he officiated the marriage between Eisenhower's grandson, David, and Nixon's daughter, Julie.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s he continued to speak at seminars and publish books. In 1984 he resigned from Marble Collegiate Church and President Reagan honored him the Presidential Medal of Freedom.³⁹ According to his obituary in the *New York Times*, Peale "wished he could go back through his books and change some of his views, particularly to strengthen the Christian view of repentance. 'Lives are being destroyed by sin,' he said in 1978. 'The need is to get sin out and bring the person to the point where he can know something better.'"⁴⁰ Peale died in his Pawling, New York home at the age of 95.

³⁸ Roy M. Anker, *Self-Help and Popular Religion in Modern American Culture: An Interpretive Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 121.

³⁹ Geroge, 215.

⁴⁰ George Vecsey, "Norman Vincent Peale, Preacher of Gospel Optimism, Dies at 95," *New York Times*, December 26, 1993.

Chapter Two

The Making of the Message

Norman Vincent Peale was known for his message of positive thinking, which developed over time and was popularized through many publications, especially the runaway best seller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*.⁴¹ The message built on his early struggle with shyness and doubt and his experiences in sales, and was crafted through the influence of his journalistic training and interest in contemporary marketing techniques. It was a simple message of believing in oneself and was repeated over and over again in his publications, speeches, and sermons. The following chapter examines the roots of the message and its development in his ministry.

"My Consummate Inferiority Complex"

Throughout his lifetime, Norman Vincent Peale struggled with doubt. As an unusually shy child, Peale had what he called an inferiority complex that made him shy and withdrawn. He described it as "perhaps the most difficult problem I ever faced as a youth: namely, my horrible inferiority complex. I was shy, reticent, shrinking, filled with self-doubt. In fact, I lived like a scared rabbit."⁴² "I doubt that anyone was ever less likely to become an effective speaker than I. I definitely was not endowed with superior linguistic skill. In fact, as a boy in Ohio, I was exceedingly

⁴¹ According to the preface to the fortieth anniversary edition of the book published in 1994, the book sold more than fifteen million copies worldwide. Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, 11.

⁴² Norman Vincent Peale, *The Positive Power of Jesus Christ: Life-changing Adventures in Faith* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts, 1980), 24. See also Allan R. Broadhurst, *He Speaks the Word of God* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 23 where he quotes a Peale sermon from 1957.

shy and inarticulate.”⁴³ The complex did not subside as he grew, but continued to plague his life and ministry.

His parents attempted to help him overcome his reticence by giving him opportunities to speak in front of people.

Now and then, acting on the old sink-or-swim theory, they would call upon their bashful boy to recite a poem to an admiring circle of friends or relatives. The chief result of this was that whenever he saw any visitors arriving, Norman would hide in the attic. His Uncle Will used to tell of being sent to find Norman and dragging him from his hiding place to the living room where, like an early Christian being thrown to the lions, he was ordered to speak his piece about the boy on the burning deck.⁴⁴

Allan Broadhurst, who analyzed the sermons of Peale in a book entitled *He Speaks the Word of God* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), identifies three contributing factors to Norman’s shyness. First, he believes the shyness derived from the expectations of being a pastor’s son. As the minister’s son in a small town, Norman was expected to behave perfectly. The pressure made him constantly aware of his behavior. Second, he was a short and skinny boy. Third, his brother Clifford, though younger, showed remarkable prowess for the activities that set boys apart from their peers. “He was tough, aggressive, self-assured, ready for a fight, and endowed with a competitive instinct.”⁴⁵

A grade school teacher named George Reeves impacted Peale’s slow but gradual ascent out of self-doubt toward becoming America’s foremost positive thinker. Reeves pushed his students to believe in their own abilities. “I bless the name of George Reeves, for he started a trend of thought working in the mind of a

⁴³ Broadhurst, *He Speaks the Word of God*, 21.

⁴⁴ Gordon, *Minister to Millions*, 21.

⁴⁵ Broadhurst, *He Speaks the Word of God*, 18.

shy little boy. I am sure he had an influence upon my development of the positive thinking principle. He lodged in my mind the essence of an idea: The way one thinks has a powerful effect upon one's ability to perform effectively."⁴⁶ Reeves' method was simple. He would write on the blackboard the word "CAN'T" and then ask the class what he should do. After enough repetition the students were ready to respond, "Knock the "t" off can't" and hear the lesson. "Let that be a lesson to you—you can if you think you can."⁴⁷

The seed planted by Reeves was harvested by Norman's father Clifford in a memorable event that is found in both of his autobiographies.⁴⁸ Norman went with his father on a pastoral call to visit a rural family. In order to enjoy the weather they walked to and from the visit. On the way home, Clifford asked questions of his son. In the course of the conversation Norman revealed his struggles with self-confidence and his father responded in a way that shaped the rest of Norman's life. Clifford told his son that Jesus had the power to heal Norman of his inferiority feelings.

Finally Father said, "Norman, are you willing to let this great Doctor, Jesus Christ, treat you for that inferiority complex? If you will let Jesus take charge of your mind, indeed your whole life, you can be freed of the misery which, if it continues, can destroy your effectiveness." I was profoundly impressed and said I would give my life into the hands of Jesus. Father told me to kneel down by the stump and he, too, knelt.... Father then committed me to Christ in a moving prayer. He then asked me to tell Jesus that I was giving myself into His hands and letting go, by an act of affirmation, all my inferiority feelings. As we walked home in the gathering twilight I felt a strange sense of peace and happiness, as though I was really on top of my problems. While I

⁴⁶ Peale, *True Joy*, 23.

⁴⁷ Ibid. The lasting impact of Reeves is evident in the recurring usage of the story throughout Peale's career, and, most notably, as the title for one of his books. See, Norman Vincent Peale, *You Can If You Think You Can* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1974). He tells the story on 96-98.

⁴⁸ Peale, *The Positive Power*, 24-26; *True Joy*, 34-36; *This Incredible Century* (Pawling, NY: Peale Center for Christian Living, 1991), 30-32.

had another bout with this trouble during college days later on, the same remedy was again applied, with the result that this self-defeating thought pattern was healed through the positive power of Jesus Christ.⁴⁹

That “bout in college” came to a head after an economics class with Dr. Ben Arneson. Arneson recognized Peale as a leader on campus and a bright student, but in class he was timid and shy. He did not speak up much and Arneson thought he was in need of a challenge. He asked Peale to remain after class one day and confronted him about his insecurities and told him to rely on the power of Christ to cure him of his inferiority complex.

I know that you are proficient in this course, that you know the stuff. But you are so terribly shy, so embarrassed when I call upon you, that you get tongue-tied, red in the face, and your inferiority feelings stick out all over. No wonder students snicker. Don’t you know that shyness actually is a form of egotism and extreme self-awareness?⁵⁰

Initially maddened by the comments, Peale came to realize their similarity to the words of his father a number of years earlier. He then sat on the chapel steps and prayed to be released from his burdens. “And I thanked [God], for the feeling was overwhelming that my prayer was going to receive an affirmative answer.”⁵¹

Although that day on the chapel steps was significant, doubts persisted throughout his life. The opening story about how his manuscript became *The Power of Positive Thinking* is indicative of its persistence. Like many preachers, Peale was naturally introverted. In reflecting on his many years of friendship with Peale and his children, John Huffman, a friend of Peale and former intern at Marble Collegiate

⁴⁹ Peale, *The Positive Power of Jesus Christ*, 26.

⁵⁰ Peale, *The True Joy of Positive Living*, 48. The lasting impact of Arneson’s words is evident in a book Peale published more than twenty years later. “For one thing, when a man gets his mind on God, he gets it off himself. Fears accompany excessive thinking about oneself.” Norman Vincent and Smiley Blanton Peale, *Faith Is the Answer: A Pastor and a Psychiatrist Discuss Your Problems*, Enlarged and Revised (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1955), 72.

⁵¹ Peale, *The Positive Power of Jesus Christ*, 26.

Church, commented on Peale's quiet, unassuming presence in the midst of conversation in contrast with his strong personality when before crowds.⁵² Carol George, author of *God's Salesman*, describes him as "an especially sensitive man."⁵³ This dichotomy of spirit is indicative of his shy, reticent nature. He often admitted that his writings were as much for him as for anyone else in need of the positive power of Jesus.⁵⁴ Gradually, Peale began to understand that his own struggles against doubt were not singular but were common to many others in society. As his faith had become a means of climbing out of the slough of despond, as it were, a vision for helping people began to develop.

Gospel Salesman

Peale had profound respect for and admiration of salesmen. He saw them as "quintessential Americans, whose very livelihood depended on an optimistic hold on the future, entrepreneurs of the self who had to believe in their own ability to make the next sale."⁵⁵ He developed that respect through a lifetime of interaction with businessmen as a speaker at innumerable sales conferences, but the respect was built through his own experiences. Before graduating high school, Peale had three different sales jobs, which tested his inferiority complex and gave him anecdotal fodder for countless future speeches and books.

⁵² John A. Huffman, interview by Daniel Walsh, , *Norman Vincent Peale*, South Hamilton, MA (September 30, 2011). Huffman met Peale in Jerusalem in 1959, became friends with his children, and worked with Peale at Marble Collegiate from November 1962 until June 1964. More details about his time with Peale are available in John A., Jr. Huffman, *A Most Amazing Call: One Pastor's Reflections on a Ministry Full of Surprises* (Self-published). Especially relevant are chapters 8-13 and 18-19.

⁵³ George, *God's Salesman*, xii.

⁵⁴ The *Power of Positive Thinking* "came out of my own struggles to find myself." Peale, *The Positive Power*, 29.

⁵⁵ George, *God's Salesman*, xi.

"I suppose I have spoken at about as many sales rallies and conventions as anyone, and I have had a lifelong interest in salesmanship and an appreciation of people in sales. In all likelihood this interest began with a sales experience during the summer vacation when I was twelve."⁵⁶ Peale saw an ad in a youth magazine about an opportunity to sell aluminum cookware door-to-door. The sales kit came with some sample products and a sales talk for entrepreneurial teens to memorize. Peale was convinced that the novel items would sell well and set out to conquer a nearby town.

His first day was not a raging success. When he finally conjured enough nerve to knock on a door, he managed to stammer, "You don't want any aluminum ware, do you?" To which the woman replied, "Of course not," and slammed the door in his face.⁵⁷ Discouraged, but not defeated, Peale returned home and sold half of his little company to a friend. Together they spent the summer going door-to-door selling aluminum ware. Peale never revealed how much, if any, success he had in the endeavor but ended each account with an anecdotal story about a woman to whom he made one of his first sales.

Years later when I spoke in Indianapolis, an aged lady took me by the hand. "You sold me some cooking utensils long ago in Union City. I liked you, for you were young and confident and enthusiastic; and what a good salesman! Now you 'sell' the gospel with the same enthusiasm, if you don't mind me using that expression."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Peale, *This Incredible Century*, 32.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 34. See also, *True Joy*, 38.

Peale's second sales experience was with his uncle Will, the same uncle who dragged the shy boy from his hiding place to recite poetry for family guests.⁵⁹ Uncle Will taught Peale the power of advertising and the key components of public speaking. Will brokered deals with local banks in rural Iowa to sell land reclaimed through mortgage defaults. He was a powerful and convincing speaker and knew that if he could get people to attend he would be sure to convince many to buy land. Norman was brought on as "the advertising man, the painter of stakes, the street layout man, and the general flunky."⁶⁰ More specifically, Norman assisted him by recruiting people in the towns with token gifts of chocolates and money. At each sales meeting, Will would give away a Ford Model T, but the winner had to be present at the pitch to be eligible.

Will combined deft advertising talent with a powerful voice. He instructed Norman on the efficacy of his marketing techniques and on the skills of good oration. Norman utilized and developed his uncle's techniques at all his churches and his uncle's speaking advice was another foundational factor in his success. Will laid out six rules for effective public speaking:

Rule number one is to be heard clearly. Rule number two is to articulate so people will know what you are saying. Rule number three is to have something worth saying. Rule number four is to be honest—completely honest. Rule number five is to give good value in what you are selling or

⁵⁹ There is a conflict in the literature about the sequence of Peale's early jobs. In *God's Salesman*, Carol George states his first experience was selling papers as a boy. That story is not used frequently by Peale in his later writings, and thus is ignored here. However, it is mentioned in passing in *True Joy*, 30. George then writes on page 33, that his first job was with Uncle Will and his second job was selling aluminum. George's argument follows *True Joy* 30ff, in which Peale states he started working with William Fulton Peale in 1912 and only later sold aluminum. This conflicts with the quote from above from *This Incredible Century* because Peale would have been 12 in 1910, and 14 in 1912. Regardless of the chronology, the three sales experiences had lasting effects on his ministry, which is the point of this section.

⁶⁰ Peale, *True Joy*, 32

advocating. Rule number six is to appeal to the mind, the heart, common sense, reason, and emotion.⁶¹

Peale employed all these methods and combined them with what he learned in journalism to be a powerful and sought-after speaker and author.

Peale's third sales experience was selling suits in Bellefontaine, Ohio, the town where he graduated high school in 1916. A local merchant, Emil Geiger, asked him to take old inventory out to farmers in the countryside and pitch them as Sunday suits. Before releasing the teenage salesman, he gave him advice that became part of Peale's anecdotal repertoire. "Always remember, son, the secret of salesmanship is to have good merchandise that you can honestly recommend. And when your product is something the customer needs and will serve him well, be a good persuader."⁶² It took Peale only a few days to sell his entire inventory, and just as the aluminum salesman story ends with an anecdote each time it was recounted, so too this story ends with an anecdote. When Geiger visited Peale in New York a number of years later, Peale recalls him saying, "You love the people, you have merchandise we all need, you are honest in your belief in what you are offering, and you are a good persuader." Then he added his highest Jewish compliment, "Only, you should have been a rabbi."⁶³

Peale became a salesman of the gospel of Jesus Christ believing that it was the best way for people to overcome doubt, fear, and anxiety. "The preaching and teaching of Christianity as a way of thinking and living is a form of salesmanship. By these approaches, one tries to get people to accept the message and persuade them

⁶¹ Peale, *True Joy*, 33.

⁶² Peale, *True Joy*, 42-43.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 43.

to walk a road of agreement with him.”⁶⁴ In selling the gospel later in life he used all the techniques and experiences he gained as a young man and employed those stories again and again as anecdotal evidence.

“The Greatest Literary Device Known to Man Is a Period”

Before he became a minister, Peale wanted to be a journalist. “Actually, I wanted to be a newspaperman, a writer.”⁶⁵ He got his start in the newspaper business as a freshman at Ohio Wesleyan and rose to associate editor of *The Transcript* his senior year. During summers in college he worked at *The Morning Republican* in Findlay, Ohio, where his family had moved. Like many young reporters he started writing obituaries and moved up to the police beat. His early experiences in Findlay taught him to write precisely and sparingly. “The art of economy in words, the crisp, short sentence, the unbroken flow of ideas were all valuable skills I learned on my newspaper job, and I have striven ever since to perfect them.”⁶⁶

That initial advice on concise writing was solidified in the final journalism job he had. Through a connection his father had, Peale was hired in 1920 as a reporter at the *Detroit Journal*.⁶⁷ During his interview with managing editor, Grove Patterson, Peale heard the advice to write simply again. “The main thing about writing is to keep it simple. Never be obscure. Never be involved. Never try to Write with a

⁶⁴ Norman Vincent Peale, “Enthusiasm Makes the Difference,” in *Three Complete Books*, 407-603 (New York: Wings Books, 1994), 444.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁷ Gordon, *Minister to Millions*, 68 is the only place that mentions the fact that his father was the connection that landed him the job.

capital W. Use simple Anglo-Saxon words, and keep your sentences short. The greatest literary device known to man is a period. Remember that.”⁶⁸

Working in journalism was thrilling for Peale but his heart was conflicted. He sensed a call to ministry but was not willing to accept it. While reporting on a fire in Detroit, Peale encountered what might have been the final push in his personal struggle toward ministry. A girl was trying to cross from the burning building to a safe building across a small plank. She was six-stories above the ground and Norman stepped forward to offer words of encouragement. “Don’t stop honey, God is helping you. Keep on straight ahead.” The response from a nearby policeman startled him, “Good job, son. You sound like a preacher.” “Oh, I’m no preacher,” I protested. “The hell you are not,” he replied.⁶⁹ It was not long after that experience that Peale attended the Methodist conference during which he contacted Boston University and left journalism for good.

The Message

The writing record of Peale is massive. He authored more than forty books, countless newspaper columns and magazine articles, and many sermons.⁷⁰ Throughout his writing his struggle with his inferiority complex, his sales career, and his journalistic background are evident. His writing drew on this background to

⁶⁸ Ibid., 69. Peale’s own account in *True Joy*, 59-62 is slightly different. Patterson “took out a pencil and put a dot on a sheet of paper. “What is that?” he asked. “A dot,” I replied. “No, it’s a period, the greatest literary device known to man. Never write over one” (60).

⁶⁹ Peale, *True Joy*, 61-62.

⁷⁰ Carol George, *God’s Salesman*, 253 states that she looked through 850 boxes of collected documents in the Peale Manuscript Collection in addition to the forty-one published books available to her.

produce a popular message that made him one of the best-known personalities of the 1950s.

The core message of Peale's ministry was that there is power in thinking positively. Peale's message was intended to be practical, helpful, and encouraging. *The Power of Positive Thinking* "is written with the sole objective of helping the reader achieve a happy, satisfying, and worthwhile life."⁷¹ "My purpose is to help every person who may read this book to acquire spiritual skill, that he may develop a useful, effective, and satisfying life."⁷² "The purpose of this book is to give practical help to men and women everywhere in the greatest of all arts, the art of living."⁷³

Peale's idea of positive thinking developed during his early ministry experience and grew out of a sincere desire to help people. In *God's Salesman*, Carol George identifies a major step toward the positive thinking principle. "In a sermon at University Church near the close of the decade, he introduced his congregation to two positive thinkers: one was the apostle Peter and the other was the Arctic explorer Richard Byrd."⁷⁴ He believed whole-heartedly that his message was the Christian gospel in new packaging designed to comfort and assist people in leading happier, fuller lives. In an article for the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship publication HIS, Peale wrote, "Over the years what I have tried to do in my simple way is to preach the gospel, the old, Christ-centered, Church-centered, Holy Spirit-

⁷¹ Norman Vincent Peale, "The Power of Positive Thinking," in *Norman Vincent Peale: Three Complete Books* (New York: Wings Books, 1994), 14.

⁷² Norman Vincent Peale and Smiley Blanton, *Faith Is the Answer: A Pastor and a Psychiatrist Discuss Your Problems*, Enlarged and Revised (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1955), 18.

⁷³ Norman Vincent Peale, *The Art of Living* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1937).

⁷⁴ George, *God's Salesman*, 63.

centered, gospel.”⁷⁵ And many years later in the preface to the 40th anniversary edition of *The Power of Positive Thinking* Peale wrote, “I have merely tried to describe [the truth of Christianity] in the language and thought forms understandable to present day people.”⁷⁶

Before his name became associated with the term “positive thinking,” Peale thought and wrote with the terminology of faith. If you recall from the introduction, Peale titled the manuscript that would become *The Power of Positive Thinking*, *The Power of Faith*. He was convinced that faith, properly understood and practiced would produce happiness and fulfillment. “I believe most people sincerely desire the benefits given by faith but their trouble is they do not know how.”⁷⁷ The concept of faith in Peale’s early writings describes a technique or an “art of living” which enables people to overcome fear, worry, anxiety, guilt, grief, failure, and so on.⁷⁸

Faith to Peale was a power to be harnessed through repetition and practice. It was a skill that needed to be acquired and incorporated into one’s life.

The art of having faith may be developed through two suggestions, if they are faithfully followed: (1) the practice of simple but habitual prayer and devotional meditation; (2) the surrender of your life in an attitude of childlike trust in the will of God.⁷⁹

A key component of the practice of faith was that it was genuine. Faith to Peale was not showing up on Sundays and looking like a Christian, but rather practicing one’s

⁷⁵ Norman Vincent Peale, “Personal Testimony,” *His*, May 1960, 33.

⁷⁶ Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, 11.

⁷⁷ Peale and Blanton, *Faith Is the Answer*, 18.

⁷⁸ See Peale and Blanton, *Faith Is the Answer* and Norman Vincent Peale, *The Art of Living* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1937).

⁷⁹ Peale and Blanton, *Faith Is the Answer*, 19.

faith. "I have never yet known a man to be defeated who believes in and practices—and the emphasis is on practices—sincere faith in God."⁸⁰

The key to identifying and employing the power of that faith was in recognizing the source of its power. "The secret of happiness lies in exercising the spiritual power within yourself." That spiritual power is the reality of God within you. Peale interprets the words of Jesus in Luke 17:21, "the spirit of God is within you" (KJV) to mean, "in each of us is God."⁸¹ In Peale's theology, God is within all people providing a kinetic source of energy waiting to be used to fulfill humanity's desire for happiness and fulfillment.

Peale viewed life as a puzzle that needed to be solved. In the preface to *You Can Win*, originally published in 1938, he describes a scene in which a complex machine like an airplane appears in a non-industrialized culture. To a person examining the machine it would be obvious that it had a designer and that plan was followed to create it. He uses that illustration to say that life is like a complex machine that must have a method for making it function properly. The book explains a method that "He has tested...in his own experience and has found that it works for him when worked."⁸² Ultimately, the system, the method is "real Christianity."⁸³

The power of faith in one's life had additional terminology. It was alternately called *The Art of Living* or *Confident Living*, but the message was the same. The

⁸⁰ Ibid., 77.

⁸¹ Ibid., 155.

⁸² Norman Vincent Peale, *You Can Win* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1949), x.

⁸³ Ibid., 5. By real Christianity, Peale meant "to distinguish between that formal type of Christianity which works itself out in beliefs passively held, and that type where one puts his life with all of its concerns in the hands of God and, sincerely trying to live out Christ's spirit in daily life, trust God to care for him, guiding him in his decisions and sustaining him by divine power and grace."

troubles one faces in life can be overcome by learning faith, or the “art of living,” or “confident living.” It starts with reforming oneself and recognizing inherent worth and value. “At heart we underestimate ourselves. We do not really believe in ourselves and remain for that reason weak, ineffectual, even impotent, when we could be strong, dominant, victorious.”⁸⁴

The central message of Peale’s ministry grew substantially once he began ministering at Marble Collegiate Church. In private counseling sessions he encountered many people dealing with fear, anxiety, and depression in response to the Great Depression. His thought had developed to the point that he began to preach regularly on “how faith in God could give courage and wisdom together with new insights for the solution of problems.”⁸⁵ Religion and psychiatry were partners in the same endeavor, the healing of souls. When the caseload became too much, Peale developed a relationship with Smiley Blanton and worked to unify his understanding of the power of faith with psychological ideas of the subconscious.

A Guide to Confident Living was an important step forward in Peale’s positive thinking message. In it he began to condense his message into workable formulas developed from “lab tests” in the religio-psychiatric clinic he operated at Marble Collegiate Church. In the opening chapter Peale argues that church is a form of group therapy and offers “ten rules to guide you in mastering the art of church going.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Peale, *The Art of Living*, 9.

⁸⁵ Norman Vincent Peale, *A Guide to Confident Living* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1948), 5.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

While *Faith Is the Answer* utilized scientific and psychiatric language extensively, *A Guide to Confident Living* began to replace some of that vocabulary with more popular terminology. Peale built his arguments on the same psychological foundations, but sought to simplify the psychological and religious terms. "It is my belief that the Christian religion has not been made simple enough...We should learn that the really effective way to make religion a useful tool is to cast it in simple thought forms and work out its techniques in very lucid and simple procedures."⁸⁷

A Guide to Confident Living was the final book in which Peale stressed so heavily the validity of his arguments based on developments in psychology and science. Although the scientific system supposedly undergirding his thought continued to appear in his later works, *A Guide* stressed again and again that all of the ideas grew out of psychological research and clinical practice.

It is important to think of the minister as a scientific person...A prominent physician, Dr. James H. Means of the Massachusetts General Hospital, and Professor of Clinical Medicine at Harvard University, said, "The patient, when he is sick, should send for his minister as quickly as he sends for his doctor."⁸⁸

A Guide to Confident Living was a transitional book between Peale's early ministry and *The Power of Positive Thinking*. The title of his most famous book is utilized as the idea developed in his own terminology. In a chapter about getting rid of one's inferiority complex—no doubt reflecting the process through which Peale himself worked—Peale relates the contents of a speech he gave in Iowa. "I emphasized at some length *the power of positive thinking*, and asserted that practice

⁸⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 28-29.

of the techniques of faith makes it possible for a person to overcome difficulties. Positive thinking was outlined as a cure for the inferiority complex.”⁸⁹

The ideas that had been formulating in Peale’s mind since childhood were groomed and tested through sermons, counseling sessions, and motivational talks over thirty years of ministry. They came together in their clearest form in *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Gone from the book are the repeated references to doctors and psychiatrists whose ideas on the human subconscious were important to the earlier works already surveyed. They were replaced by stories of “actual people,” whose names are usually withheld, who had applied the principles of the book and found “amazing results.”

At its foundation, Peale’s theory is that thoughts control the mind, which in turn controls behavior.

You can think your way to failure and unhappiness, but you can also think your way to success and happiness. The world in which you live is not primarily determined by outward conditions and circumstances but by thoughts that habitually occupy your mind.⁹⁰

The Power of Positive Thinking lays out a system whereby people can learn to think right thoughts to achieve desired ends. “By the methods I shall outline, obstacles are simply not permitted to destroy your happiness and well-being. You need be defeated only if you are willing to be. This book teaches you how to “will” not to be.”⁹¹

Peale condenses his arguments into a series of “rules,” “points,” “formulas,” or “suggestions.” Each chapter has a simple point such as creating happiness,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 51-52, emphasis added.

⁹⁰ Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, 169.

⁹¹ Ibid., 14.

defeating worry, or getting people to like you. At the end of most chapters he condenses the point of the chapter into pithy statements and suggestions. At the end of a chapter on believing in yourself he writes, "Ten times a day repeat these dynamic words, 'If God be *for* us, who can be *against* us?' (Romans 8:31) (Stop reading and repeat them NOW slowly and confidently."⁹² As part of a "worry-breaking formula" he suggests, "You can become free of worry by practicing the opposite and stronger habit of faith. With all the strength and perseverance you can command, start practicing faith."⁹³

Undergirding the book is the idea that positive thinking is another name for "applied Christianity." The power of God is assumed throughout and appealed to often only as an afterthought. "Whatever *you* believe *you* can do, *you* can do, with God's help."⁹⁴ It seems that Peale believed his credentials or the times were sufficient that his readers assumed the underlying Christian belief behind the text.

I need not point out that the powerful principles contained herein are not my invention but are given to us by the greatest Teacher who ever lived and who still lives. This book teaches applied Christianity; a simple yet scientific system of practical techniques of successful living that works.⁹⁵

The book hit a nerve with Americans in the 1950s and sold hundreds of thousands of copies. It was not without its critics, and in many ways Peale's later works sought to defend his views against them. If the techniques outlined in *The Power of Positive Thinking* were not working, perhaps one simply lacked enthusiasm.

⁹² Ibid., 28.

⁹³ Ibid., 131.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 124, emphasis added.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 15.

But invariably someone comes up with the pious reproof that it is wrong to encourage people to hope for something they cannot attain, that only the gifted, the well-favored can attain the goals. But such individuals are wrong as usual, the plain fact being that any person, however seemingly impossible his circumstances, who develops *enthusiasm* for something and the fortitude to carry it out can make the most utterly astonishing things happen.⁹⁶

In *The Positive Principle Today*, published in 1976, Peale confronted the persistent objection that positive thinking works temporarily but is not sustainable long-term. In the foreword Peale quotes an anonymous letter at length which he received and which sparked his writing of the book. The author of the letter relates that he struggles to remain motivated for long periods of time. He asks Peale to explain how he can remain positive when life events get in the way. He relates that difficult situations “drain on my high spirits and presently I find myself feeling like a deflated balloon.”⁹⁷ Many people attested to the same problem and the book attempted to address their concerns. “The positive principle is the vital process of mental and spiritual alteration whereby the individual shifts from a concept of self-limitation to that of self-improvement, from deterioration to growth, from failure to accomplishment.”⁹⁸ Inherent in the positive principle is the ability of man to change his current state of affairs through thinking right thoughts.

Throughout his forty-one published books Peale’s message remained constant. His message was that positive thinking changes subconscious reactions and behavior resulting in a better life. It was not a simple process but one that required dedication, effort, and the help of God through prayer. It was a

⁹⁶ Norman Vincent Peale, “Enthusiasm Makes the Difference,” in *Three Complete Books*, 407-603 (New York: Wings Books, 1994), 538, emphasis added.

⁹⁷ Peale, “The Positive Principle Today,” 227.

⁹⁸ Norman Vincent Peale, “The Positive Principle Today,” in *Norman Vincent Peale: Three Complete Books* (New York: Wings Books, 1994), 230.

Christianized message of success that enabled practitioners to achieve the growing materialistic dreams of midcentury America. His message was well received by millions of Americans but was not welcomed by all. The next chapter examines his critics.

Chapter Three

Critiquing Positive Thinking

Peale's message was popular with the American public, but it drew much criticism from clergy and academia. According to Peale's official biographer, "Most of the reviews that greeted *The Power of Positive Thinking* on its publication in the fall of 1952 were favorable."⁹⁹ Some initial reviews were negative, but it was not until 1955 that "The Rage of the Intellectuals" against Peale's message began.¹⁰⁰ This chapter examines the critiques of Peale's message published in the 1950s and then offers an evangelical critique of Peale's message that was strangely lacking at the time.

Wayne Oates, Professor of Psychology of Religion at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, offered an early critique of Peale's message entitled "The Cult of Reassurance."¹⁰¹ Oates conducted an analysis of the writings of Peale in order to equip pastors and counselors to deal with parishioners and patients influenced by Peale's message. Oates concluded that Peale's message has two facets. First, "*Faith*, according to Peale, is a realization of one's wishes through effective thought control." Second, "*Religion* is a means of achieving these wishes, which results in success."¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Gordon, *Minister to Millions*, 248.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. The phrase is the title to chapter 15 of Gordon's book.

¹⁰¹ Wayne E. Oates, "The Cult of Reassurance," *Religion in Life* 24, no. 1 (Winter 1954-1955): 72-82. It was originally published in the July 1954 issue of *The Review and Expositor, a Baptist Theological Quarterly*.

¹⁰² Ibid., 73, 74.

Peale's success, in Oates' opinion, was not a considerable surprise given the writing style and simple message he offered. His message fit right in with the "hand-to-mouth religious thinking of the average American businessman, who, by reason of excessive, vertical, social mobility has lost touch with his religious heritage."¹⁰³ Furthermore, the message struck a chord with the nostalgic religious beliefs of many Americans and condensed those thoughts into useful, pithy statements that offered hope for one's own abilities in a decade of uncertainty.

Peale was open to criticism on two fronts, religious and psychological, with religious critiques being more effective. From Oates' religious point of view, Peale's conception of personality, which can be morphed to one's desires, assumes incorrectly that people know what they want. He quotes the apostle Paul in Romans 7:15 (RSV), "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Oates also critiqued Peale's belief that people can overcome challenges by denying them. In Oates' view, limitations are overcome when they are recognized and accepted as real in light of Christian teaching. His final religious critique is that the logical conclusion of Peale's message is that anyone not living the successful life is out of harmony with God, a dangerous outlook in his view.

In addition to religious critiques, Oates took issue with four components of Peale's thought, which drew from psychological research. In Peale he found use of conditioning, reassurance, suggestion, and psychosomatic medicine. In each case, Peale's popular version incorrectly gave false hope to people with real psychological

¹⁰³ Ibid., 74.

issues. He cites an experience with a patient who had tried to recondition her thoughts according to Peale's methods by keeping negative thoughts from her mind. When repeated attempts failed to produce real change she "felt really awful because I had not only all my awful thoughts, but I was also worried over having no positive thoughts!"¹⁰⁴ In tongue in cheek fashion, Oates ended his article by saying, "I must end my article at this point, lest I seem to think negative thoughts."

The cheeky humor of Oates' final statement was taken further in one of Peale's best-known critiques, an article entitled "Some Negative Thoughts About Norman Vincent Peale," by William Lee Miller.¹⁰⁵ After reading all of Peale's published works to date, Miller writes, "Let me say, in the unlikely event that anyone else would undertake this redundant inspirational feat, that it isn't necessary. If you have read one, you have read them all."¹⁰⁶

Miller explains that Peale's success had less to do with his personality and delivery than with its singular purpose. To borrow the terminology of Dan and Chip Heath, the redundant nature of his message made it sticky.¹⁰⁷ "One comes away [from Peale] with a vivid awareness of the one thing he said. It is an idea that has made Dr. Peale."¹⁰⁸ The repetitive nature of the message made it stick with people

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹⁰⁵ William Lee Miller, "Some Negative Thoughts About Norman Vincent Peale," *The Reporter*, January 13, 1955. Miller also published an earlier article in which he critiqued Peale's fundamental message to believe in oneself as opposed to the traditional Christian gospel, which includes elements of sin and God's judgment. He also argued that Peale's message had significantly more in common with contemporary self-help and pop psychology than with traditional Christianity. See, William L. Millier, "The Gospel of Norman Vincent Peale," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 10, no. 2 (January 1955): 15-22.

¹⁰⁶ William Lee Miller, "Some Negative Thoughts About Norman Vincent Peale," *The Reporter Reader*, Max Ascoli, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 2.

¹⁰⁷ Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ Miller, "Some Negative Thoughts," 4.

but cheapened his message. Miller argues that he boiled down respectable ideas within Christianity and psychology into a self-centered dogma of easy attainment. Miller gets to the heart of the intellectual critique by pointing out that the ever-positive nature of Peale's ideology blurs his followers to the realities of life.

Dr. Peale's rejection of "negative thinking" may be a rejection of any real thinking at all, for serious thought necessarily involves the confrontation of all the elements of problems. Dr. Peale's message tends to reinforce the anti-intellectualism of the times, for any serious thought is bound to appear somewhat negative to the bland outlook of the Peale follower.¹⁰⁹

Roy Anker offers a helpful summary of the contemporary critiques of *The Power of Positive Thinking* and writes that Peale's ideas were difficult for his critics to comprehend.¹¹⁰

They struggled to comprehend their strangeness in relation to what they, as an intellectual elite, understood to be the burning religious, cultural, and political issues of their day, most of which, as the popularity of Peale's books proved, had little pertinence of interest for Peale's audience of middle-class suburbanites¹¹¹

In addition to Oates and Miller, Anker highlights some of the popular critiques such as Paul Hutchinson, then editor of *Christian Century* in a piece for *Life* magazine entitled "Have We a New Religion?" in which Hutchinson attributes Peale's success to a middle class search for meaning in a time of uncertainty.¹¹² Reinhold Niebuhr offered a similar critique of a societal yearning for a civil religion of faith in a June 1955 piece for the *New Republic*.¹¹³ Other critiques centered on Peale's theology and came from academics like Gerald Runkle, William Lehmann, Jr., E.G. Homrighausen,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹¹⁰ Anker, *Self-help and Popular Religion in Modern American Culture*, 121-143 offers helpful synopses of critiques contemporary and modern.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 122.

¹¹² Paul Hutchison, "Have We a New Religion?," *Life*, April 11, 1955: 138ff.

¹¹³ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Varieties of Religious Revival," *New Republic*, June 6, 1955: 13-16.

A. Roy Eckhardt, and Martin E. Marty who all questioned the historical orthodoxy of Peale's message by relating it to passages and doctrines from both the Old and New Testaments.¹¹⁴

Although Peale struggled with the intellectual culture at Boston University he retained a respect for scholars. To be criticized by so many was difficult for Peale and it left him "shaken."¹¹⁵ The criticism was so unnerving to Peale that he again considered resigning from Marble Collegiate Church in order to pursue ministry and speaking engagements elsewhere. Peale related to Carol George that he thought he could do better outside the organized church by setting up something of his own.¹¹⁶ The storm settled and he continued to minister, but the popularity of his message deserves continued critique as it has become part of popular religious thought in America.¹¹⁷

An Evangelical Christian Critique of Positive Thinking

Peale's writings raise several important questions for conservative Christians. Peale's primary assertion that believing in oneself produces happiness, success, and comfort is contrary to the Christian gospel. His conclusion is predicated

¹¹⁴ Gerald Runkle, "Does Spiritual Faith Insure Physical Benefits?" *Theology Today* 11 (1955): 483-94; William Lehmann, Jr., "The Theology of Norman Vincent Peale," *Concordia Theological Monthly* (February 1958): 90-97; E.G. Homrighausen, "Receipt for the Full Life," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* (October 1957): 11-15; A. Roy Eckhardt, *The Surge of Piety in America: An Appraisal* (New York: Association, 1958); Martin E. Marty, *The New Shape of American Religion* (New York: Harper, 1959).

¹¹⁵ Gordon, *Minister to Millions*, 251. The entire chapter is a defense of Peale's message in which Gordon essentially argues that the proof of the need of Peale's message is evident in its popular success.

¹¹⁶ George, *God's Salesman*, 146.

¹¹⁷ Peale could not have imagined as a young man that "his influence would significantly alter and, for some critics, even define the United States' religious and cultural landscape for the latter half of the twentieth century." Ackerman, *Self-help and Popular Religion in Modern American Culture*, 101.

on a number of faulty presuppositions from an evangelical perspective. The following section examines Peale's view of human nature, his exegetical methodology, and his view of God. Finally, it echoes the critique of Oates above in wondering about the efficacy of Peale's techniques for people with acute psychological problems.

Peale's view of human nature was essentially positive. "Whether you are prepared to admit it or not, you *are* a good person basically....Indeed, religion may be regarded as the formal statement of an instinctive good in human nature which is as natural as hunger."¹¹⁸ People are innately good and possess an untapped well of strength, energy, and vitality. If people are innately good, then the inferiority complexes, which many experience, are anomalous to the positive power underneath. "The greatest secret for eliminating the inferiority complex, which is another term for deep and profound self-doubt, is to fill your mind to overflowing with faith. Develop a tremendous faith in God and that will give you a humble yet soundly realistic faith in yourself."¹¹⁹ The underlying problem to Peale was not that people were fundamentally corrupt or bad, but that their fundamental goodness was clouded by deluded senses of inferiority.

Traditional Christianity holds the opposite view, and teaches that humanity is fundamentally corrupt.¹²⁰ Sin is the Christian understanding that the world is not

¹¹⁸ Peale and Blanton, *Faith Is the Answer*, 45, 105. Emphasis original.

¹¹⁹ Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, 21.

¹²⁰ In theological circles, this is the problem of human depravity. Drawing primarily on the writings of Paul, St. Augustine of Hippo developed the orthodox understanding of depravity in response to a man named Pelagius (cf. *The City of God*). The view was strengthened by Martin Luther and John Calvin at the Reformation and played a significant role in the debates between Calvin's successors and Jacob Arminius at the Synod of Dort.

the way it is supposed to be.¹²¹ Traditional Christian theology teaches that humans are born with a fundamental disposition toward sin and away from God. Thus, the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 1:20-25,

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.¹²²

Paul states that humanity's predisposition is to turn away from God in sin rather than worship him as Creator.

The traditional Christian view of sin is that it is a disposition, but to Peale it was a "mental infection."¹²³ In Peale's view, sins are negative acts carried out by sovereign human beings that provide guilty thoughts to the unconscious. If left to fester untreated in one's mind it can cause infection, which leads to such undesirable outcomes as a lack of enthusiasm or zeal for life. "A primary function of religion...is to point the way to happier living by teaching men and women how to cope with a sense of guilt."¹²⁴

¹²¹ One of the best definitions of the Christian concept of sin comes from theologian Cornelius Plantinga, Jr, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 10, 14, where he describes sin as the breaking of shalom. Shalom is "the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight...shalom means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed."

¹²² Cf. Romans 3:10-11

¹²³ Peale, *Faith Is the Answer*, 102.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

The traditional Christian view also argues that humanity's default state is contrary to God's desires. God declared his creation good in Genesis 1, but humanity turned against him and must be restored to him in order to experience the blessings offered Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Peale's thought, however, is more in line with John Locke's *tabula rasa* view of human nature. "We are not born with a complete self. Nature endows us with only a nucleus, only the potentials."¹²⁵ Combined with a positive view of human nature, it is evident that Peale's philosophy drew on these foundations to see humanity as an empty slate with unlimited potential into which positive thoughts needed to flow.

If Peale's view of human nature presents a challenge to traditional Christian beliefs, his exegetical methodology presents a challenge to traditional methods of interpreting and understanding biblical teaching.¹²⁶ In *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* (New York: Harper One, 2007), Alister McGrath argues that the Protestant Reformation enabled the interpretation of the Bible on an individual level to the point that almost any interpretation was acceptable.¹²⁷ The flexibility of interpretation enabled by the Reformation and described by McGrath is evident in the writings of Peale. In the words of one of Peale's critics, Peale "quotes sentences

¹²⁵ Ibid., 95.

¹²⁶ "Exegesis is the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning....It is the attempt to hear the Word as the original recipients were to have heard it, to find out what was the *original intent of the words of the Bible*." Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 23.

¹²⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: Harper One, 2007). According to McGrath, although the original leaders of the Reformation like Luther and Calvin stressed the need for clergy, education, and diligence in biblical interpretation, it was not a big step from Luther's concept of the "priesthood of all believers" to an ideology that anyone can interpret the Bible to mean whatever he or she sees it to mean.

and little snatches of selected passages taken out of context as maxims which one can repeat three or five or seven times a day.”¹²⁸

Because Peale believed Christianity to be a scientific, practical faith applicable to Christians and non-Christians alike as a tool for successful living, it made sense that he would mine the Bible for passages supporting his theology. “I found the solution of this problem in the simple techniques of faith taught in the Bible. These principles are scientific and sound.”¹²⁹ In seeking to prove his points, however, Peale was forced to select texts without regard to their literary context.

A good example of his method is a verse from the fourth chapter of Philippians. The book of Philippians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a church he started in Philippi about his imprisonment and his praise for their continued efforts in the faith. In chapter four he is nearing the end of his discourse and is repeating his thanks for their generosity. It is within that context he makes two statements. Traditional interpretive methods take into account literary units, in this case a paragraph. In verses 11-12 Paul writes, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether in plenty or in want.”

Peale ignores the context of the preceding verses in order to focus on verse 13, which is important to his theology, “I can do everything through him [Christ] who gives me strength.” This verse appears again and again in his writings. In *The*

¹²⁸ Miller, *The Gospel of Norman Vincent Peale*, 21.

¹²⁹ Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, 20.

Power of Positive Thinking it is a “magic statement” to be repeated ten times a day.¹³⁰

Later, the verse is held up as a technique for removing obstacles. “I have lived a long time and have faced a lot of difficulties in my time, but there is power in those words—actual power—and with them you can remove any obstacle.” Still later the verse is an “antiworry formula.” It is even part of a healing formula used in one of Peale’s anecdotal stories.¹³¹

The magic of Philippians 4:13 is expanded in *The Positive Principle Today* into an entire chapter. The repetition of the seven-word formula “I can do all things through Christ” has demonstrable power.

It has demonstrated power to erase failure, increase strength, eliminate fear and overcome self-doubt. It will help any individual become a more successful human being in the top meaning of that term. Indeed, these seven words have the incredible power to make you everything you ever wanted to be when they are applied in depth....In those seven magic words is your formula for inspiration, power, motivation and the ability to keep it going.¹³²

Peale’s positive view of human nature enabled him to take Philippians 4:13 out of its context, and extrapolate from it an understanding of Christianity that makes God man’s partner in the pursuit of happiness. Yet it is clear from the immediate context as well as the book of Philippians as a whole that Paul is not arguing that point. Paul argues that his faith in Christ enabled him to be content whether he was eating well or being imprisoned and tortured for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Roman Empire. Paul taught contentment in Christ, while Peale taught contentment in worldly success.

¹³⁰ Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, 28-29.

¹³¹ Ibid., 111, 130, 154.

¹³² Peale, *The Positive Principle Today*, 301.

Peale's selective use of Biblical texts allows him to make God "into a kind of divine supermarket or self-serve gas station where individual selves go to fill this need or that."¹³³ With texts like Philippians 4:13 Peale shows his audience demonstrable proof of the Bible's message of success and happiness. He repeats a small cadre of texts again and again to support his message while ignoring a larger cadre of texts that speak of suffering and loss.¹³⁴

A second example of Peale's method is his interpretation of Matthew 17:20, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." The verse supports a critical theme in Peale's theology, "We receive good in direct proportion to the amount of faith we exercise."¹³⁵ "The requirement is faith, and directly in proportion to the faith that you have and use will you get results."¹³⁶

Success and achievement for Peale were achieved through faith, properly exercised. One of his favorite anecdotal stories is about a man who was inspired by Matthew 17:20 to create a successful business. Maurice Flint asked his wife to get him a mustard seed after attending a few services at Marble Collegiate Church so he could carry one around in his pocket as a reminder of the text. When he realized how small the seed was he devised a method to encase it and put on a necklace. Realizing an opportunity he turned it into a successful business. "Mr. and Mrs. Flint have a factory in a Midwestern city producing Mustard Seed Remembrancers...[and

¹³³ Anker, *Self-help and Popular Religion in Modern American Culture*, 119.

¹³⁴ Additional texts which appear again and again include John 10:10 "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full," and Mark 11:24, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

¹³⁵ Peale and Blanton, *The Art of Living*, 23.

¹³⁶ Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, 139.

they] sold like hot cakes.”¹³⁷ The story serves as an irrefutable example about the power in the verse to produce success.

It also raises a significant concern within the traditional Christian understanding of faith. If, as Peale argues, the true exercise of faith will be evident in happiness and success within one’s life, then what about all the supposedly faithful Christians who are not living the lifestyle he describes? The logical conclusion is that their faith is not strong enough, and perhaps not genuine. It is a troubling theology because it elevates the role of individuals in securing their own ends and diminishes the role of God in providing for his people. It contradicts texts like Matthew 6:25-34 where Jesus instructs his followers not to worry about possessions but to seek God and one’s material needs will be provided.¹³⁸

Peale’s positive thinking theology is unable to address the needs of people with acute psychological problems and, as Wayne Oates pointed out in 1954, leads to further guilt over one’s inability to use positive thinking to affect change. Peale’s theology is built on the premise that positive thinking gets results, but positive thinking cannot help people overcome all psychological issues. Even in a mentally

¹³⁷ The story is related in Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, 139-143 and the quote is from 142. It is also related in Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 225-226.

¹³⁸ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

healthy person repeated failures have a way of generating self-doubt and disbelief.

Because Peale stressed consistent positive thinking, failure to achieve results is

failure to change oneself and that can be damaging and unhelpful.

Chapter Four

The Origin of Peale's Thought

Norman Vincent Peale represents a confluence of three streams of American thought. First, his ministry after World War II was at a high point of American exceptionalism whose roots can be traced to John Winthrop and the settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.¹³⁹ Second, he was the popular manifestation of Mind Cure thought with roots in nineteenth century Transcendentalism.¹⁴⁰ Third, he was a Methodist by birth and training within a rural context that gave him a particularly populist, earthy view of America.¹⁴¹ Each of these divergent trends influenced Peale directly or enabled him to operate in such a way that his was a unique contribution to American religious history and made him, arguably, the best known and most popular preacher in the 1950s.

American Exceptionalism

Aboard the *Arabella* the first settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony heard a stirring sermon from their leader, John Winthrop. In his sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" he employed the words of Matthew 5:14, "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid" (KJV) to rouse his fellow Puritans to

¹³⁹ See, Francis Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁴⁰ See, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* (New York: Harper, 1959); Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹⁴¹ Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

the occasion that was set before them.¹⁴² Facing persecution in England, Puritans believed that the new settlement would operate as a beacon of truth to their countrymen in England causing repentance and reform within the Church of England to which they belonged.

The settlers who left England believed that their mission in New England was akin to the mission of Israel as it left Egypt. Just as Israel was to be God's light in the Ancient Near East, so too the Puritans of New England believed they were called to be God's light in the New World reflecting His brightness back to England and the rest of Europe.

For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake; we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.¹⁴³

The first generation of settlers worked diligently to make this dream a reality. They believed whole-heartedly in the mission they had received and established structures to ensure its flourishing.¹⁴⁴ The civil government of the early colony required church membership to hold civil office, and church membership was predicated on a believable confession of faith evident in the works of one's life. This strict boundary was set to keep church and government pure, but its inherent problems arose quickly.

¹⁴² See John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1649 Abridged Edition*, Richard S. Dunn and Laetitia Yeandle, eds., 1-11 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴⁴ The classic argument is found in Perry Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954).

In his masterful analysis of the sermons of the colonies from 1630 through 1776, *The New England Soul*, Harry Stout traces the development of thought from the first through the fifth generations of preachers. While form remained remarkably similar throughout those 146 years, content began to change as fashions of thought and political realities generated issues that needed to be addressed. The dream of the colony continued to break down, and was eventually reconstituted in the dreams of liberty and a free society. Thus, in the closing line of his book Stout writes, "New England's revolution would be nothing less than America's sermon to the world."¹⁴⁵

The dream of the colonial founders was not abandoned, of course, only modified. If America could not build a city on a hill to prove the validity of a theocracy, it would create a nation unlike any in previous existence built on the thought of Greek philosophers and modern thinkers like John Locke. The tens of thousands who fled England for the New World were not content with the status quo and sought to create something different in order to exert their inalienable rights as free citizens of the world God created. "A new conception of freedom and equality took shape, involving conceptions of God, man, human rights, the state, and history, which became inseparable from the Enlightenment's outlook on reality."¹⁴⁶ Although their dream of a new society eventually failed its message continued leaving a legacy many scholars identify as American exceptionalism.

¹⁴⁵ Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 311.

¹⁴⁶ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 362.

As Mark Noll shows in *Christians and the American Revolution*, some, but not all ministers in the colonies interpreted the events and eventual victory of America in theological terms. Remnants of the theological foundations of exceptionalism persisted in this generation but became secularized as the government moved away from evangelical foundations toward more Deistic forms.¹⁴⁷ International realities played a part as well as the young nation sought ways to bolster its existence. But all of these activities were buoyed by the idea that America was different. America had defeated the most powerful empire on earth and whether it was a result of Providence or human strength seemed to some irrelevant.

By the middle of the twentieth century the idea of exceptionalism had become tied to civil religion. In *A Christian America*, Robert Handy traces the development of Protestant churches working together to ensure that no single denomination was the established church of the new United States of America and how that disestablishment led to the creation of a civil religion.¹⁴⁸ “From the beginning American Protestants entertained a lively hope that some day the civilization of the country would be fully Christian.”¹⁴⁹ In attempting to accomplish that task, Protestants in the 19th century focused on civil progress, which inadvertently lead to the decline of religious distinction. Yet the ideas of progress and Christianity were sufficiently wed together that Americans in the mid twentieth

¹⁴⁷ Deism is a theological concept in which a powerful being, not necessarily “God,” created the world and left its future to human activity. See, John Orr, *English Deism: Its Roots and Its Fruits* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1934), Herbert M. Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960). For its role among America’s founding fathers see, David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁴⁸ Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, viii.

century understood progress and America's success to be at least partly derived from Christian foundations.

The convergence of civil religion and American exceptionalism is exemplified in book published in 1954 by Edward Elson entitled *America's Spiritual Recovery*.¹⁵⁰ Elson was pastor of the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC and baptized President Eisenhower. He dedicated the book to the President and a foreword was written by then Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover. Elson argues that to ensure its future as leader of the free world, America must return to and build up its religious foundations.

As Americans we are confronted with tremendous obligations. Following two World Wars and the repulsion of the Korean aggression, we have become the stewards of the greatest military victories in all history, and in large measure we are today the guides of this world's destiny. To a very great extent the future of the race depends on what we are and on what we do.¹⁵¹

The outcome of the future, in Elson's view, depended on the level of commitment Americans had to their Christian foundations and to their country's role as world leader. "If our democracy should vanish, it would be because we have not been sufficiently Christian."¹⁵² Elson was not a rogue thinker but was articulating in book form what President Eisenhower was communicating to the country through popular media. Eisenhower was the epitome of the union between Christian civil religion and American democracy. According to historian Martin

¹⁵⁰ Edward L. R. Elson, *America's Spiritual Recovery* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1954).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 73.

Marty, Eisenhower stated in 1948, “a democracy cannot exist without a religious base. I believe in democracy.”¹⁵³

Peale’s views on the role of religion in American public life combined two themes. On the one hand he wanted to reclaim the nostalgic faith of generations past and on the other hand he believed that a revival of religious interest was vital to American success. In his ministry Peale encountered many individuals for whom faith was a relic of the past, which had no experiential hold on the lives of modern people. He longed for the days when faith was a deeper part of society. “Our fathers were for the most part men of personal religious experience. Often it was said of them, ‘They had religion.’ That meant that God was real to them.”¹⁵⁴

Peale believed in the efficacy of a religion of experience and wanted his contemporaries to experience life-changing religion. He argued that periods of revival in American history breathed new life into the political, social and economic life of the nation. Those revivals arose when traditional religion gave way to experiential forms. “It is profoundly hoped that [a new revival of religion] will happen again in America, and that right soon. It alone can save us.”¹⁵⁵ According to Peale, revivals restored faith both publicly and privately. “If a re-emergence of religion as personal experience is the solution for the vitiated life of the nation, so will it restore the power of effective living to the individual.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion, Volume 3: Under God, Indivisible, 1941-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 302.

¹⁵⁴ Norman Vincent Peale, *You Can Win* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1949), 7.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Mind Cure

While Peale's popular piety underlay his concern for revival in American religion the most direct source of his theology was "Mind Cure" or "New Thought." The term mind cure is an umbrella concept covering a number of phenomena that emerged in the 19th century including Swedenborgianism, Transcendentalism, and Christian Science. What unifies all of these various philosophies is a pantheistic view of a deity that works in nature to make humans flourish to their full potential.¹⁵⁷

The appearance of philosophies later termed "mind cure" is best understood as the convergence of three ideas that widened their public appeal during the nineteenth century: individualism, Deism, and modern science. Individualism grew out of eighteenth century philosophy, and, as has already been mentioned, was central to American thought.¹⁵⁸ Deism separated God from the world while mind cure sought to repair that distinction in forms distinct from traditional Christian dogma.¹⁵⁹ Modern science built on the Enlightenment's notion of rationalism and enabled people to have a high view of the possibilities of man.¹⁶⁰ At the convergence

¹⁵⁷ See, Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: A Study of the American Quest for Health, Wealth and Personal Power from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale* (Garden City, NY: 1965), Roy M. Anker, *Self-Help and Popular Religion in Modern American Culture: An Interpretive Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), John G. Cawletti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man: Changing Concepts of Success in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), Richard M. Huber, *The American Idea of Success* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971) Richard E. Wentz, *Religion in the New World: The Shaping of Religious Traditions in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), Peter Williams, *America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures* (New York: MacMillan, 1990).

¹⁵⁸ Thomas C. Heller, ed., *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

¹⁵⁹ For resources on Deism see note 146 on page 56.

¹⁶⁰ See, George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), Jon H. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), R. Hooykas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1972), Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

of these three ideas sits mind cure, the belief that man can, with the assistance of a deity, achieve healthy fullness in psychological, social, and economic terms.

Individualism had become a hallmark of American thought during the 19th century. Westward expansion and more than a century of experience settling the wilderness ever westward created an aura around those willing to leave comfort behind to forge their own path. While Puritanism had been radically communal, the transition to radical individualism built on the same philosophies that stirred the Revolution and pushed enterprising individuals westward.¹⁶¹ If every individual was created with inalienable rights, then it was not a far leap to assert that those individuals were autonomous beings with bright futures, which only had to be achieved.

Mind cure adopts this motif when it focuses on the ability of individuals to assert and achieve their own destinies. In contrast to the trappings of the Old World in which one's vocation was determined by one's birth, the New World opened up opportunities to enterprising individuals to create their own vocational paths.¹⁶² This reality became more widespread in the latter half of the century as the industrial development brought steam power to boat and train transportation.

While this iteration of individual vocational assertion is not unique to mind cure it did find popular proponents in a component philosophy, Transcendentalism. In 1836 Ralph Waldo Emerson published *Nature*, the manifesto of the nascent

¹⁶¹ See Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) for more on the distinction between communal Puritanism and individualistic Americanism.

¹⁶² See, Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

movement, in which he articulated the idea of man's need to find ultimate fulfillment and truth within. Emerson builds his argument on the unity of man, nature, and God. Nature is man's domain, God permeates it, and beauty is seen in its essence. Because it is subservient to man he is able to bend it to his will through the exertion of some sort of force in conjunction with the greater power, or "Universal Being" who permeates the same space.

All men understand some sense of the "universal soul" which exists in man and nature. Emerson argues that Reason is the guide to this universal understanding to which men belong as some sort of subservient beings, imbued with power to act to bend will toward man's ends. His thought is Platonic in that he understands virtues to exist outside of man, but man can pursue and understand them to some degree. The key to his line of thought is the will, and the exertion of the will to achieve one's ends is "the secret" that "he can reduce under his will, not only particular events, but great classes, nay the whole series of events, and so conform all facts to his character. Nature...receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode."¹⁶³

Transcendentalism latches on to ideas of individualism and Deism to assert that the ultimate sovereignty of man is guided by Reason. Reason is not a detached evidentiary Reason but one that sees and seeks harmony between Nature and Reason. Individualism feeds the idea that man has ultimate dominion over nature, allowing him to bend it to his will through the assistance of a divine being detached from creation. Deism, building on the ascendant Rationalism of the eighteenth and

¹⁶³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Nature and Other Essays*, ed. Lisa Perniciaro, 1-34 (Dover Publications, 2009), 16.

nineteenth centuries, informs the view of God as aloof, utilitarian, and not sovereign. The Deistic God created man with a vast intellect with which he was to discern the rules of the world and make it work for his ends. An aloof God soon became no God and left a vacuum for many wanting to see a god at work in nature who was not the Christian God of the Bible.¹⁶⁴

Into that vacuum stepped a number of philosophies that understood God as an encompassing and ever present mind or deity that pervaded the universe. To tap the power of this ethereal being one had to use channels of various sorts. One of the earliest manifestations of mind cure were the Mesmerists who sought the deity in hypnotic experience. Franz Mesmer, a German physician who practiced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, developed the idea now known as hypnotism, believing that by calming a patient's mind he could assist the psyche underneath. Historian Robert Fuller has noted "modern psychiatry and mind-cure share a common origin in their reliance on hypnotism as a route into the interior of the human psyche."¹⁶⁵

Phineas Parkhurst Quimby took the mesmerist idea of being able to change the deepest parts of one's psyche a step further to argue that disease is a state of

¹⁶⁴ This view is contrary to the traditional Christian view of God as expressed in works like *Kingdom Prologue* by Meredith Kline. Kline asserts the lordship of man over creation within a covenantal understanding of Biblical theology. His covenantal view does not detach man's authority from God's as Transcendentalism does. He sees an ordering of the universe in which God is the ultimate authority and king with pervasive dominion, and man is to rule as subservient kings under his lordship. See, Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006).

¹⁶⁵ Anker, *Self-help and Popular Religion in American Culture*, 16. The summary is based on Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

mind and that healing comes through the adjustment of mental attitude.¹⁶⁶ Quimby was a handyman in southern Maine during the first half of the nineteenth century. He fell ill and found healing in Mesmerist teaching, and then he became a healer of his own. Over time he noticed that his methods often achieved results more through mental suggestion than through any complicated medical procedure. Quimby came to believe that a patient's "belief in the efficacy of the remedies played the decisive role" in their healing.¹⁶⁷

The best-known proponent of mind cure was Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science or Church of Christ, Scientist. She built on Quimby's assumptions to assert that the Bible is a healing textbook, a scientific work, designed to provide healing for mankind.¹⁶⁸ "Quimbyism was a healing method and only incidentally a religious teaching,' while Christian Science would become entirely 'a religious teaching and only incidentally a healing method.'"¹⁶⁹ For Eddy, the Biblical notion of carnal mind undergirded what she eventually called "malicious animal magnetism" or MAM. If the mind could be trained to heal its infirmities, then it could also be utilized to stir negative thoughts in other people.¹⁷⁰

Disease, imperfections and unrealized potential were the concepts against which mind cure fought. God was good and love and therefore stood on their side

¹⁶⁶ For more on Quimby see Anker, *Self-help and Popular Religion in American Culture*, 48-57 and Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers*.

¹⁶⁷ Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: A Study of the American Quest for Health, Wealth and Personal Power from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale* (Garden City, NY: 1965), 16.

¹⁶⁸ See, Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: A Study of the American Quest for Health, Wealth and Personal Power from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale* (Garden City, NY: 1965), Julius Silberger, Jr., *Mary Baker Eddy: An Interpretive Biography of the Founder of Christian Science* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).

¹⁶⁹ Anker, *Self-help and Popular Religion in American Culture*, 52, quoting Stephen Gottschalk, *The Emergence of Christian Science in American Religious Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

¹⁷⁰ Anker, 60-66.

against any processes that prevented man from achieving his full potential. Mind cure proponents synthesized the ideas of a good god permeating all nature with the idea that health and fullness are good things. Mind cure thinkers “suggested an alternative: health might come to be an end in itself. A new style of man might emerge: he who lives to avoid affliction.”¹⁷¹ Anyone not living full, healthy lives were victims of their own poor thinking guided by a world foreign to the good ends that the pervasive good god wanted for them.

Mind cure ideologies gained traction as psychology grew in public importance. William James did not dismiss the theory that mental issues caused some diseases, and Sigmund Freud made popular the idea of latent memories causing aberrant behavior and preventing people from leading fulfilled lives. In the 1920s Boston University introduced psychology into the curriculum for ministers at their divinity school, legitimating the science for pastors. Peale attended BU during the decade and was influenced by its teaching.¹⁷²

Peale built on mind cure’s elevation of the will and asserted that positive thinking was the key to overcoming many of life’s issues and problems. He stood at the apex of a century’s worth of efforts arguing for a pantheistic god whose spiritual power pervades creation waiting to be tapped for the benefit of creation’s greatest achievement, man, with all his reason and intellectual capabilities. In examination of Mark 11:24 in *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Peale wrote

Contact with God establishes within us a flow of the same type of energy that re-creates the world and that renews springtime every year. When in

¹⁷¹ Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers*, 12.

¹⁷² Anker, *Self-help and Popular Religion in Modern America*, 108 asserts that Peale encountered the works of mind cure proponents in the homes of his Syracuse parishioners.

spiritual contact with God through our thought processes, the Divine energy flows through the personality, automatically renewing the original creative act.¹⁷³

Mind cure permeates Peale's writings. Most critical to Peale's adaptation was the ability of thoughts to control outcomes.

Religion attempts to govern fundamental instincts and impulses by saturating the mind with spiritual ideals to such an extent that the automatic functioning of life will be on a basis of strength and goodness. Religion teaches us to allow only good and beautiful thoughts to enter the unconscious because of the obvious fact often demonstrated that the unconscious can only send back what was first sent down.¹⁷⁴

Earlier proponents of mind cure had been religious outsiders and drew significant criticism from medical science and theologians. "Peale's lasting accomplishment...was to insert the essential core of nineteenth-century New Thought theology not only into the mainstream of American Protestantism but into middle-class American culture as a whole."¹⁷⁵ Peale encountered similar resistance but the time was evidently ripe for mind cure to be absorbed into popular American religion.

Methodism

As the son of a Methodist pastor, Peale attended a Methodist university and a Methodist seminary, and served Methodist churches prior to his appointment as pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. His Methodist upbringing and the Arminian theology that undergirds it were important components of Peale's

¹⁷³ Ibid., 44.

¹⁷⁴ Peale and Blanton, *Faith Is the Answer*, 48.

¹⁷⁵ Anker, *Self-help and Popular Religion in American Culture*, 104.

thought.¹⁷⁶ The most critical components for our discussion are the freedom of choice given to man in choosing salvation and the pragmatic piety of Methodism.

Peale combined these two aspects of Methodism with mind cure into a powerful formula of Christian praxis. Wesleyan choice of God was combined with Transcendentalism's elevation of the Will into a Christian view of life that saw everything within the power of man to accomplish. Furthermore, Peale extended Wesleyan perfectionism into a homespun pragmatism that did away with theological considerations and focused on enabling people to achieve the shade of perfectionism present in mind cure.¹⁷⁷ A Methodist view of God pushed Peale's thought to consider the inherent power of man to develop a pragmatic philosophy that ignored doctrine and tried to help people find fulfillment in life rather than in an afterlife.

In the unconscious are all the forces, which make for our success or failure, our misery or our happiness. These forces, according to their strength, control the mind, determining our choices and decisions. In the unconscious lie hidden energies which can defeat us if not understood and properly used but which wisely used can endow us with great power. Religion says that when these hidden energies are brought under the influence of Christ as Master of life, the most amazing results appear in people whose lives were hitherto commonplace or defeated.

By the phrase "coming under the influence of Christ" we mean the acceptance of Christ's way of life as our own. Further than that, it requires an attitude,

¹⁷⁶ Arminian theology refers to Jacob Arminius, a seventeenth century Dutch thinker, who took issue with John Calvin's conception of free will. Calvin believed that God made the first and only move in salvation, while Arminius argued that people could move toward God to obtain salvation. The debate came to a head at the Synod of Dort in 1618 after which the famous TULIP acronym of Calvinism was articulated in opposition to Arminian views. For insight into the ongoing debate between Calvinists and Arminians see, Robert A. Peterson and Micahel D. Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004) and Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

¹⁷⁷ The history of Methodism and its popular development are beyond the scope of this essay. See note 141 on page 53 for general resources on Methodism. See also Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958-1959).

which we call spiritual experience. The standard word for it is “conversion.” It is a surrender of self to God by an act of faith, a wholehearted readiness to follow God’s will.

This spiritual experience drives deeply into the personality, laying a controlling hand upon the unconscious mind, the inner life force, holding firmly in check the destructive elements, and releasing the hidden energies to produce a person of wisdom and power.¹⁷⁸

In this extended quotation we see the confluence of mind cure and Wesleyan thought. From mind cure comes the idea of positive and negative forces controlling our minds. From Wesleyan thought comes the need for experiential conversion, which enables change. When combined the Christian spiritual experience of conversion enables the mind cure idea of divine power to invade one’s psyche and steer life toward more positive outcomes.

Peale’s Methodist roots also encouraged in his writing a populist image of rural America against the bustling cities and growing suburban landscape of mid twentieth century America. He remembered fondly the food and smells of his Ohio upbringing and set it against modern city life. He related the story of visiting a farmer and his family one time as a boy for supper. The farmer read from the Bible before the meal and asked Peale’s father to say grace. “And over long years I still seem to hear the reverent voice of that good man reading the sacred words.”¹⁷⁹ Peale equated simple, practical faith of quintessential American rural life with wholesome, dedicated Christian faith.

¹⁷⁸ Peale and Blanton, *Faith Is the Answer*, 52.

¹⁷⁹ Peale, *This Incredible Century*, 36.

Chapter Five

Understanding Peale's Success

Thus far we have examined the life of Norman Vincent Peale, his message, his critics, and the sources of his theology. It is clear at this point that Peale was an enormously popular figure during the 1950s through his writing, his radio and television programs, and his speaking engagements. And while his embarrassing foray into politics during the Nixon-Kennedy campaign in 1960 explains a temporary decrease in his popularity, it does not sufficiently answer why Peale's popularity declined after the 1950s.

The question that remains is why he was such a popular figure in one decade, but his popularity declined significantly in the following decades. It has been noted that his message was the same from his early works in the 1930s through his works in the 1970s, but his popularity did not continue. He remained a popular speaker for business and sales conventions but sales of his later books never approached the phenomenal popularity of *The Power of Positive Thinking*. If Peale's message was the same and his presence in popular magazines and radio programs was the same, at least for several years into the 1960s, then there must be some element about the 1950s that enabled Peale's success.

The mantra of advertising is "location, location, location," but perhaps the same principle applies to Peale. He was on the radio and selling books in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s. *A Guide to Confident Living*, which was published in 1948, reached the bestseller lists, but it was not until the 1950s that he became a

household name. If location is the mantra for advertising, then timing was the mantra for Peale.

Peale's message struck a chord with millions of mostly middle-class Americans during the 1950s in a way that was different from decades previous and since. Peale's message spoke to the displaced culture that sociologist Peter Berger calls "psychic homelessness...[which was] part of the now familiar fallout of the march of modernization: the disruption of social, familial, and geographic roots and the loss of regard for an historical past."¹⁸⁰ An examination of America in the 1950s is necessary in order to explain Peale's success.

Cultural Considerations

In some ways the fifties were a calm between two storms: the storm of world war in the forties and the cultural storm of the sixties. Indeed, that is often the view of the decade portrayed in television shows like *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. But that view of the decade is more nostalgia than reality. The fifties were the years of Joseph McCarthy, the H-bomb, Sputnik and the Korean War. They were unsettled years as Americans learned to deal with the new realities of post-war life.

J. Ronald Oakley, in *God's Country: America in the Fifties*, argues that the nostalgic view of the fifties is no longer tenable.¹⁸¹ There are too many contradictions in the decade to maintain that view, and many of today's realities grew out of the decade. The book "depicts the 1950s as an exciting and seminal

¹⁸⁰ George, *God's Salesman*, 106.

¹⁸¹ J. Ronald Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: Barricade Books, 1986).

period when many of the features of today's society—such as the Cold War, ban-the-bomb movements, television, the youth culture, the drug culture, national educational debates, the civil rights movement, space travel, and rock'n'roll—were born or came into their own.”¹⁸² It was a decade of change with lasting impact on American culture.

Perhaps the most important change Americans faced during the decade was the transition to world power and its accompanying prosperity. America emerged from the forties as one pole in a bipolar power struggle with the Soviet Union. It had earned its seat at that table through cooperating with the USSR to defeat Fascism in Europe and Asia, but then found itself in an arms race with its former ally. The victory in World War Two and the subsequent arms race created a boom economy that enabled Americans to have more leisure time and more disposable income than any previous generation. The fifties were “indeed an American high: high confidence and pride, high responsibility, high wariness and anxiety all somehow coexisted.”¹⁸³

Post-war prosperity created a new cultural dynamic as suburban sprawl was fed by the availability of cheap automobiles. The American dream was reconceptualized around a nuclear family in a suburban single-family house in which the wife stayed home with the children while the husband commuted into the city in one of the family cars. “This state of affairs was basically seen to be as it should be....The nuclear, not extended, family seemed best to embody the dream.”¹⁸⁴ The new nuclear family was able to purchase an array of new home products

¹⁸² Ibid., x.

¹⁸³ Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 6.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 3.

enabling housewives abundant time for outside activities whereas in decades past more housework would have been expected.

Historian Robert Ellwood discusses the idea of “togetherness” that permeated the decade believing that it was a key component of people’s self-understanding.¹⁸⁵ The family unit was the epitome of being together in a happy, cohesive unit. Schools and clubs were also places for practicing togetherness, which ultimately, was a cultural ideal attempting to redefine America in a post-war society.

Richard Lints, philosopher and theologian, traces the development of the “liberal middle” during the decade and concludes that its centrist beliefs were untenable during the sixties.¹⁸⁶ But during the fifties, the “liberal middle” was a safe place wherein civic religion contributed to a sense of togetherness and belonging amidst troubling cultural trends. Furthermore, the comfortable middle aided in the transition from a pre-war blue-collar economy to a post-war, increasingly white-collar economy.

In sum, there were a number of changes and conflicts during the fifties that caused Americans to seek meaning in the midst of chaos. Secularism and its faith in humanity and progress had led to Soviet Communism, the arch-enemy of American democracy and, thus, was not a vital explanation for dealing with the times. As it turned out, the answer Americans sought was found in religion. But it was not the religion of their parents—it was the popularized civic religion of the American way of life.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 1-21.

¹⁸⁶ Richard Lints, *Progressive and Conservative Religious Ideologies: The Tumultuous Decade of the 1960s* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

Religion in the Fifties

Religion was popular in the fifties. In 1955 and 1958 47% of Americans attended church on an average Sunday. Church building projects consumed \$935 million in 1959 as compared to only \$26 million in 1945. Church membership outpaced population growth, comprising 63.3% of population in 1959, and polls showed that 99% of Americans believed in God.¹⁸⁷ The distribution of the Bible increased 140% between 1949 and 1953, and the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was atop bestseller lists for several years.¹⁸⁸ Religious book titles like Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, A Man Called Peter by Catherine Marshall, *Peace of Soul* by Fulton Sheen, and *Peace with God* by Billy Graham competed with the RSV for number one on the bestseller lists.

Will Herberg offered a comprehensive picture of religion in 1950s America in a 1955 book entitled, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*. Herberg begins his analysis by describing a paradox of "pervasive secularism amid mounting religiosity."¹⁸⁹ Statistically, Americans were intensely interested in religion, but their knowledge and practice of faith did not correlate sales and attendance statistics. According to one poll, 80% of Americans agreed that the Bible was the "revealed Word of God" rather than simply a "great piece of literature," but an astonishing 53% of the same respondents could not name a single Gospel in the New Testament. "The Bible can hardly be said to enter into the life and thought of Americans quite as much as their

¹⁸⁷ Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace*, 1-2, 5, 9.

¹⁸⁸ Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 14.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

views on its divine inspiration and their eagerness to buy and distribute it might suggest.”¹⁹⁰

With that paradox in view, Herberg’s thesis is that “both the religiousness and the secularism of the American people derive from very much the same sources,” and are understood best against sweeping sociological changes in the preceding decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁹¹ The core of his sociological argument is the redefinition of identity among third generation immigrants. Third generation immigrants were the grandchildren of the great waves of immigrants that came to America’s shores beginning in the late nineteenth century.

First generation immigrants identified themselves largely along language lines. While at home an Italian-speaking immigrant may have identified more with Milan or Naples than Rome, but in the milieu of urban America he found his identity in his Italian tongue. Second generation immigrants struggled to define an identity that was disjointed between their parents’ language-bound sub-culture and their English-defined American culture. “To the dismay of their parents, and to the distaste of better acculturated Americans, many of the second generation tended to draw away from the religion of their fathers, and from religion all together.”¹⁹²

Members of the third generation were fully American and found renewed interest in the religious pluralism of their native America. Religion allowed them to reclaim some of what their grandparents had surrendered, namely language, while

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹² Ibid., 32.

also enabling them to fit in with broader American culture and thus open pathways to prosperity and acceptance. Religion became a cultural identity rather than a theological commitment and it was culturally acceptable to be Catholic, Protestant, or Jew. By the time he wrote the book, Herberg could conclude,

For all its wide variety of regional, ethnic, and other differences, America today may be conceived, as it is indeed conceived by most Americans, as one great community divided into three big sub-communities religiously defined, all equal and all equally American in their identification with the "American Way of Life."¹⁹³

Herberg goes on to argue that the turn to religion in the fifties is best understood as a sociological impetus to belong. "Being religious and joining a church is, under contemporary American conditions, a fundamental way of 'adjusting' and 'belonging.'"¹⁹⁴ Wade Clark Roof, in *Spiritual Marketplace*, makes a similar argument.¹⁹⁵ Roof writes about the Baby Boomers quest for meaning in the 1990s, but he is dealing with the children of Herberg's third generation. Roof identifies in the Boomers a "quest culture, a search for certainty, but also the hope for a more authentic, intrinsically satisfying life."¹⁹⁶

Another contemporary observer, Edward Elson, believed that the religious revival was a return to America's roots.¹⁹⁷ He cites the sales of popular religious books and the spiritual leadership of President Eisenhower as evidence of the popularity of religion generally and then attempts to trace the value of religious expression in the foundation of America. The signing of the Declaration of

¹⁹³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹⁹⁵ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁹⁷ Edward L. R. Elson, *America's Spiritual Recovery* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1954).

Independence was “a spiritual emancipation. Our delectable freedom came out of a vast and noble courage; it is the direct result of a lofty and invincible religious spirit.”¹⁹⁸

The core of Elson’s message was that America’s return to faith was vital to its defeat of Communism. Elson was Eisenhower’s pastor, and Eisenhower used his faith as a rallying point against “godless Communism.” It was during Eisenhower’s presidency that “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance. Eisenhower’s faith was, at least in part, an attempt to unify the American people against the communist threat. Elson provided a voice for the cause. “The Communists and their sympathizers may for a time outnumber Christians of the world, but if we have the faith we claim to have, and if we really believe and practice what we profess, we shall be indestructible.”¹⁹⁹

The popular faith of fifties America was neither Protestantism, nor Catholicism, nor Judaism, but rather a faith in the “American Way of Life.” The American Way of Life consisted of an array of values and ideals that Americans held dear and in which they placed value, but few of which were truly religious ideals. “It embraces such seemingly incongruous elements as sanitary plumbing and freedom of opportunity, Coca-Cola and an intense faith in education—all felt as moral questions relating to the proper way of life.”²⁰⁰ Furthermore, it was a faith in American style democracy as the hope for the world.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 61.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 97.

²⁰⁰ Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, 88-89.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 91ff. and Elson, *America’s Spiritual Religion*, 171-189.

Peale's Popularity

Peale's message offered displaced Americans hope in a peculiarly American future. Middle class Americans struggling to make sense of the seismic shifts in culture found in Peale's message enough nostalgia to remind them of their ancestral home, and enough optimism in the future to drive them toward success. Furthermore, Peale's Christianity-based message assuaged the guilt of many people acquiring wealth in amounts theretofore unheard of in world history. Peale's message was simultaneously a psychological salve in troubling times and a theological justification for materialism.

Peale made mind cure thought palatable to mid twentieth century America by undergirding it with more acceptable Christian terminology than Mary Baker Eddy. His charismatic preaching style and multitudinous publications enabled his message to spread to millions of homes across the country. Contrasting Peale's national success with the regional success of evangelists Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple McPherson, Roy Anker argues, "Peale, on the other hand, forged a modern communications network that placed his ebullient personality and comparatively unique message just about everywhere."²⁰²

Peale's success, then, arose from his message and his marketing. His belief that positive thinking could help people overcome life's difficulties played well in a society concerned about making it in the new economy. Furthermore, his insistence that faith could help overcome worry was important to multitudes worried about nuclear holocaust. But that message would have spread only to his congregation in

²⁰² Anker, *Self-help and Popular Religion in American Culture*, 114.

New York City, had he not employed the methods of Madison Avenue with such precision and excellence. Peale was certainly, as Carol George referred to him, God's salesman. He constructed his message in the most popular form he could imagine and repeated it over and over and over again through print, radio and television. The broad cultural interest in religion in the fifties made many Americans' ears receptive to his product and repetition ensured that many would buy.

Like any consumer product, however, Peale's message was purchased only so long as it fulfilled the needs of its customers. While many questions of the fifties were concerned with identity in the face of prosperity, the sixties began asking about the fundamental truth in the American way of life. The Baby Boomers wanted answers to segregation and Vietnam that positive thinking could not answer.²⁰³ In short, Peale's message succeeded because it answered the questions of a particular time period, the fifties. Its central assertion lost meaning as culture shifted.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ See, Robert S. Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

²⁰⁴ Although Peale's message did not continue, it is important to note that his theology opened to door to a host of popular religious figures in the latter half of the twentieth century. Preeminent among them was Robert Schuller, a friend of Peale's, who explicitly continued Peale's theology of positive thinking through his ministry at the Crystal Cathedral in California, his television broadcast "The Hour of Power," and books like *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco: Word Books, 1982). See Anker, *Self-help and Popular Religion in American Culture*, 147-172 for a brief introduction to Schuller.

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